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ANONYMOUS IN PURGATORY

Samuel Flecker
as told to
Harold Smolin

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Sam Flecker was a victim of the holocaust—from the outside looking in. He was a soul in purgatory during four years in the Russian army, doomed to exist in limbo while his family and his people were fed into flames of hate.

He was a soldier in the Soviet army shortly after Russia and Germany had slept in the same bed. During his war years he felt unable to reveal his heritage. Though they fought against Hitler, the Soviets were not significantly more tolerant of Jews than was their enemy.

—Harold Smolin

Dedicated to the memory of my late wife and cherished friend, Marilyn, who sustained me in the United States; and to the memory of my lost family: Fawish and Chana, my parents; Jadzia and Tosia, sisters; Bolek, brother; and a cousin, Tola—all of whom died prematurely at the hands of the Nazis.

—Sam Flecker

29,332 Words

INTRODUCTION

Sam Flecker's memories unfold a story of a an ordinary person caught up in an extraordinary frenzy of hate and horror called *Holocaust.* He chose from the beginning to flee to the Russian Army, where he could strike back at the forces trying to annihilate his people.

His story is powerful in its statement of one man's resistance to another man's attempt to commit universal genocide. It's a testament to all the ordinary persons who resisted the perpetrators of a monstrous crime against humanity.

Sam Flecker was sixteen years old when Hitler's marauders overran Poland in their first bid to rule all Europe and clean out the Jews, the Nazi defined misfits of any religion, the developing underground resistance, and the intellectuals who dared defy the swastika. He fled Warsaw at the insistence of his parents. The choices, as they saw it, were to join the historically anti-Semitic Russian army, or face the certainty of slave labor in a German work camp, or worse. The rationale: his well-to-do father could buy safety for Sam's younger brother, three sisters, and the parents. ... His father was fatally shortsighted.

An innate sense of humor, and a forced development of street smarts sustained Sam during his four years of battle, and then during the following years of fruitful existence in the United States.

Sam and more than two thousand other young Polish refugee volunteers spent their first year and a half as prisoners in Siberia, in a virgin forest where they had to build their own barracks with hand tools before they had any appropriate shelter. Fortunately, they were not aware they were prisoners until their status was changed.

Sam's papers were lost in the turmoil of registering all the young prisoners to their new rating. Each person was permitted to choose enlistment in the army or on a farm.

"It was utter chaos,"Sam explained. "I figured I was in for some trouble when the registrar asked for my papers."

"Sorry," I answered. "I don't have any."

"What do you mean? Everybody must have papers. Please check your foot locker and report back to me immediately."

"With respect, sir, I can't do that."

"Can't do that? ... Why can't you do it?"

"Don't have a foot locker. ...None of us have. Don't have anything to put in a locker."

"Well, we need some proof that you belong here."

Pointing to a person behind me in line, he asked: Do you know this man?"

"*Da,* he was in my barracks."

Thus Sam became a soldier, albeit a non-person in the Soviet army. This he regarded as a help in concealing his Jewish identity. Asked how he was able to hide his heritage during four years of close contact with Russian soldiers who were not enthusiastic about associating with Jews, he answered simply: "I didn't tell them."

Despite his anonymity, Sam was awarded a medal as a Hero of Stalingrad, where he sustained an injury which altered his life. Later, on the strength of his fluency in five languages, he became an officer and was assigned to the then General Georgi Zhukov's staff as an interpreter. Something in Sam apparently appealed to Zhukov, who had recently lost a son, an aviator downed in air combat. The two became good friends, often working together to elicit information from prisoners, often eating together.

Sam considers Zhukov one of the greatest military minds in Russian history. A mind that had room for a prodigious sense of humor also. Sam remembers the time Zhukov rode as passenger in a truck Sam drove in a fleet pursing the fleeing German army.

The truck broke down, and was pushed to the side of the road. Sam found a problem with the carburetor, which he jury rigged with a contraceptive he borrowed from Zhukov, and was able to join up with the rest of the fleet.

On their way, Zhukov complimented Flecker. "If you ever fell off a boat, you'd come up with a fish in your mouth."

Sam recalls Zhukov's grasp of vital information coming from German ranking officers grilled by Sam as Zhukov sat quietly observing the

interviews. Among other shortages, there was no paper available for such frivolous use as taking notes of the interrogations. Zhukov retained pertinent details which he used to plan strategy for ensuing pursuits and battles.

Sam paid a heavy price in his war against the Nazi. He lost a leg to a bomb concussion at Stalingrad. It was replaced in a field hospital without anesthesia, because there was none in the front line hospitals where he was patched up from time to time. His other foot was damaged by shrapnel in another battle. And he took a bullet in his spine during a mop-up action after Zhukov's army marched into Berlin. Again a field hospital, no anesthesia, no x-ray equipment to check the bullet's course. Afraid to risk an exploratory operation, doctors cleaned and sewed the wound and told him they figured the bullet was near his spine.

Their verdict: "You'll be all right. The bullet is near the spine, but shouldn't cause too much trouble."

Fifty plus years later, the pain, which he had managed to ignore, became unbearable. He was given one of two choices by a surgeon in Florida: *Remove the bullet or it will remove you! The chances of success in such an operation are 75 percent against you.*

Sam's doctors beat the odds. The bullet was removed, and most of the pain. His spine and leg are never free of pain, but that doesn't prevent him from swimming and dancing.

Sam always sensed the sword dangling over his head as a *Zhid* in an anti Semitic army. But he felt the course he followed at the insistence of his family permitted him to help destroy the destroyers of his people. None the less, he suffered horror and even guilt when his army liberated Treblinka, a German death camp, and he witnessed the unthinkable plight of the prisoners. And time in Warsaw in the army of its liberators. To this day, despite a successful life in the U.S., the torture is never far from his mind.

His story demonstrates that Sam was really more than ordinary, as are you and I and most people when the need arises.

AS IT IS NOW

Two views appear from my living room window: one a scene in real time, the other an overlay sketched by painful memories.

Real-time shows full-foliaged tropical trees; well tailored rich green grass, peaceful walkways in a retirement community in Florida.

Hovering in the background is a view of another life as a Russian soldier fighting against the German army from which I had fled as it invaded my native Poland. . . .

AS IT WAS THEN

Contentment was our lot in Warsaw, Poland. But fear crushed us down that last day we were ever together.

The German army was already at the mid point of its headlong conquest of Warsaw. The troops were about three days from our home. Two days before, airplanes had started to bomb and strafe Warsaw, destroying buildings, starting raging fires, turning normalcy into despair.

We knew disaster was imminent. We had discussed the where several weeks ago. We knew the why. The only undetermined was the when. That had been revealed on September 1, 1939, when Germany invaded Poland..

The shock to the areas of our minds where we concealed anxiety was no less than if we had been unaware of the Nazi threat to our country. Since the initial discussion of where Hitler would strike after the occupation of Czechoslovakia, there had been no talk of events around us—though they were constantly in our minds.

In Warsaw, airborne death and destruction started toward evening. The city's electrical system became an early casualty. The dark was relieved only by flares of exploding bombs and fires they created.

We ate supper by candlelight. There was no romance about the meal. Furniture shook, plates rattled, nerves frayed as the city cried agony.

We ate quietly, each concentrating on the approach to our area of death and destruction. Mother and the girls cleared the table, not bothering to wash and put things away, rather returning from the kitchen so we could be close to each other.

After a bit, Daddy Fawish broke into the strange quiet.

"So, children. As long as we can't get out of the house for a while," he said, "let's put the time to good use.

"You could use another dancing lesson, Samek. Tosia, it's your turn to teach him a little. I'll start the Victrola if you tell me what kind of music you want."

Tosia took a few seconds to shut her mind to the sounds outside. "I . . . how about some tango. Samek would enjoy that, I think. What do you think, Samek?"

"Sure. Why not. I don't expect I really have to study for class tomorrow ..."

Just before the invasion, I had been studying college preparatory material. I had been accepted at the Sorbonne in Paris, where I would begin the road to a medical degree. Acceptance to the prestigious university resulted from a combination of my parents' ambitions for me, my scholastic records, and an influential uncle's powers of persuasion.

Uncle Pracowity, a wealthy munitions manufacturer in Warsaw, was well acquainted in Paris, where he spent much time doing business. He brought home the documents of acceptance several months before the new semester, a surprise and a delight to us all.

If I ever knew his first name, I've long since forgotten it. Everybody, including my aunt, addressed him simply as "Pracowity." Not that he was pretentious and sought to be so called. It was more or less a custom of the times to call important persons by their surnames only, and he accepted that, regarding it as nothing more than normal.

It was already arranged that I would stay with an aunt and uncle who lived in Paris

I was assured that it was only a short time on a train for my parents to visit me, or for me to go home for holidays.

I had been carefully led to this choice of profession by my father, who constantly preached that he wanted me to be more than a merchant. This despite his having achieved ownership of a shoe factory and three prosperous stores in Warsaw. He provided a summer home in Michelin for his family. There was a caretaker couple for the house, who lived rent free in another house on our property. They were childless, and treated us as if we were their own children. There was a cow for milk and chickens for eggs. Most wondrous of all was a pony for the children. The family enjoyed a life as comfortable as did any doctor in Poland. But a successful man of business was not revered as was a man of medicine.

From the time I was able to read, I would find medical texts casually left at accessible areas in our apartment. At first I was awestruck by the pictures of nude persons, displaying parts of the body and health hazards to which they were subject. In time the text concerning injury and disease became even more exciting than the pictures. I looked forward to becoming a doctor. I never had a chance to find out if I was dedicated to science and service, or to prestige. Hitler invaded Poland the day I was to have registered at the university.

Because of the unrest in our world, we had delayed my trip to the Sorbonne. The thunder of goose-stepping brown shirted troops parading in the streets of Berlin, the rattle of armored tanks and mobile cannons, the ranting and strutting of a house painter become head of a state—a state of madness—had all of

Europe uneasy.

The prospect of a lull in formal education was pleasant. There were few Jews in the gymnasium (high school). My enrollment had been engineered by Uncle Pracowity.

Two other pupils and I represented the Jewish community in our class. We weren't popular with our Christian classmates, who resented, among other things, our dedication to education.

I had the honor of constant attention by a student who, sitting at a desk just in front of me, punctuated his dislike with harsh epithets, "Dirty Jew" being an often repeated pejorative. I accepted his discourtesy at first without response. After a few days, I warned: "Don't do that again. I'm getting tired of your dirty words."

Next morning, as our teacher wrote on he blackboard, he turned in his seat to leer at me. Again, "Dirty Jew" hissed from his lips. Almost without thinking, I grabbed a quill pen standing in my ink well. I jabbed the ink filled nib through his cheek, A satisfactory howl arose from the victim, and eighteen pair of eyes snapped to the scene. Teacher rushed from his podium down to our level.

"You, Zhid!" he screamed at me. "Go to the principal's office and wait there for me."

Then he turned to the bleeding, weeping student.

The principal had heard the outcries, and was already heading to the classroom. I continued to his office to await my fate. He returned soon to deal with me.

"So what do you have to say?" he asked. "Never mind; you can't say anything that will help. You're suspended from school—indefinitely. Now get out of here!"

I walked home very slowly, hoping to arrive at the time I normally returned from school. I didn't walk slowly enough. Momma greeted me with a question in her eyes which had to be answered. She did not express pleasure in my report, but she remained calm. I tried to hope that her attitude would influence Dad's reaction when he came home from work .

"Hello, Chana," his voice sang from the front hall. Then his footsteps. Then he stood at the kitchen door. The smile on his lips faded as he studied our faces. "Nu, why the long faces? You're supposed to be happy to see me."

"Oh, Dad, we're always happy when you come home."

My mind didn't keep track of my words. I was seeking a way to talk about suspension without inviting outrage. I decided to rely on my father's preference for the direct approach during an uncomfortable conversation.

"I was kicked out of school today."

"Oh, and what did you do to earn this distinction."

"I stabbed a shagitz with my pen."

"I suppose there was a reason," prompted Dad.

I outlined the causes for the attack: the sneers, the harsh language, the venom in his inglorious phrase: "Dirty Jew!"

"So you reacted a little bit crazy, I can't say I blame you, but I can say you acted unwisely. I'm sure you realize that, The question now is what to do about getting you back into school. I think Uncle Pracowity can help."

Uncle Pracowity arranged my return to class after a two day suspension.

Anti-Semitic treatment was not the responsibility of our Christian peers only. Many of our instructors assumed similar commitment to keep us aware of our differences. My math teacher was an outstanding practitioner of anti semitism.

I was a favorite pawn for the short, balding, humpbacked math master. He seized most opportunities to make my life a little more miserable than it usually was in his classroom.

I learned to swallow hard and restrain from confrontation—most of the time. But one day, shortly before the Nazis arrived to help fulfill his fond wishes regarding our prominent minority—I snapped back and found myself again visiting with the principal.

He had called me to the blackboard to solve a complicated math problem. Chalk in hand, I hesitated a few moments, pondering an approach. .

"Flecker!" he started, in an unnecesarily loud voice. "Don't you know what to do? Put the palm of your hand to your forehead and rock back and forth like your rabbis do. That should work."

"I've never seen that," I answered. "Could you show it to me. If I like it, I'll do it. Otherwise, too bad."

"Out!" cried the" professor. "To the principal's office, right now!

That part was easy. I simply had to follow a path I had etched all that year.

"Why?" asked the principal. "Why can't you be respectful. What happened this time?

"The truth is, sir, that he just doesn't like me. That's his business. But he doesn't have to shame me in front of the whole class."

"Well, you go home now. We'll let you know when you can come back."

Again, Uncle Pracowity effected my reinstatement.

For the rest of the school year, three months as I recall, I was completely ignored by the "Professor," as he demanded to be called. He never spoke my name during roll call, never called on me to recite, never even looked at me except in passing to acknowledge somebody else. Apparently, he never looked at my papers. They were always returned without comment or grade.

My triumph came at the end of the school year. Perhaps he was afraid of the logical conclusion—no grade even then. He signed off a comfortable passing mark, and I was ready to go to medical school. That's when Hitler took over the harassment.

Dad cranked the floor model record player, which was driven by mechanics rather than by electricity. (Our first victory against the Nazis. We had music even without electricity.) The Victrola dominated a corner of our living room, sharing emphasis with our parents' collection of massive but comfortable sofa and stuffed chairs and hand carved tables.

None of us felt we could ignore the invasion. But Dad insisted we do something constructive, rather than cower. Instead of mentally digging holes in time to hide ourselves, we taught and learned: and some enjoyed doing while others enjoyed watching. Structured music provided a buffer against the demonic symphony roaring outside.

Next morning, during a lull in the bombing, we went out of the building to view the surrounding area. None of us was able to speak for a while. I felt as if we were on an island of sanity in some maniacal time warp.

Tosia, quick witted and quick to express her reactions, remarked: "Nero fiddled while Rome burned ... and we danced while Warsaw exploded. Just look. How close we are to destruction."

The sights near our home were almost normal. Beyond that it seemed as though the chaos which had created this world, had suddenly returned to undo its work.

The city was a bizarre jungle. Its trees were naked pillars of concrete and steel rising chaotically out of an outlandish foliage of broken stone and brick rubble. Small, deep pits dug by bombs marked what yesterday had been streets and sidewalks and buildings.

"Look," I said. "Our landmarks are almost all gone!"

"Look some more," drolled Jadzia. "Our land is almost all gone!"

"It's time for us to leave," Daddy Fawish said.

"But why?" Mother tried to cling to the familiar.

"This tall building is too prominent a target. By tomorrow it will be in German territory, if it still exists at all..

"But where is it safe anymore?" persisted Mother.

"We'll go to Aunt Rysia's single family home in a less prominent community. For now, it's out of the target area. God knows how long that will last."

We packed what we could manage to carry with us. We walked. It would have been impossible for our auto to negotiate the broken streets. My siblings and I tried to carry most of the weight, but our parents insisted on hauling a fair

share. We helped each other over the treacherous piles of shattered masonry and tortured metal.

Shortly after we left our home, Mother's shoe caught on a flexible wire conduit snaking in her path. A pitiful cry issued from her lips as she fell to her knees. Dad dropped his cumbersome cases and tried to grab her. He helped her to a standing position. Whipping a clean handkerchief from a pocket, he wiped dirt and blood from a knee.

"Oh, Chanilla." It was a cry of distress, and we saw tears in his eyes. Always deeply in love with Mother, seeing her in pain shattered the reserve he had maintained during the last harsh hours. He hugged her for a moment, and we averted our gaze as he caressed her hair and voiced endearment.

Our parents didn't protest when we insisted on carrying their burdens. Dad supported Mother along the unfriendly sidewalks. In addition to snaking wires, we had to avoid streams of water formed by broken mains regurgitating along the way. Even worse were fires fed by buried gas lines. Most were apparent from a distance, but some erupted fearfully close as we fled.

In the next four years I would see much destruction, but I could never then or since erase the picture in my mind of those pitiful scenes as we traveled to a new life.

On the morning of September 3, 1939, we all sat in Aunt Rysia's and Uncle Pracowity's living room for our final family conference. Childless themselves, they had become a second set of parents for my siblings and me.

Father had felt he could buy our safety if the Germans invaded. Till now he was sure that, if the Germans came, he could bribe them with diamonds and gold to leave us alone. This blitz attack showed him the error of his thinking. He didn't yet realize how grave an error it was.

He *had* decided that at least one of our family should seek greater safety. I was the elder man child. The finger pointed at me.

Dad voiced the mandate: "Samek, you have to leave—today—and go to the East Russian sector for your own safety.

"That's right," agreed Uncle Pracowity. "If you stay, the Germans might grab you, and who knows what could happen to you. Head for Lublin, in the Russian section of Poland, and enlist in their army. At least there you will have a better chance to live. And you may be able to help free our country from the Nazis. Just try to conceal that you are a Jew. What they don't know won't hurt you."

Mother and Aunt Rysia sat together, holding hands, heartbreak welling through tears in their eyes.

Bolek, two years younger than I, voiced his own decision: "I will go with Samek. I can be a soldier, too."

"Nein, mein kind." Dad placed an arm around Bolek's shoulders. "You're

too young. You're not strong enough to walk a hundred miles with a pack on you're back. Better you should stay with us. We'll go to our vacation home in Michalin. We will be safe there. It's a small town of no importance, and far enough away to be reasonably secure."

Turning to me: "Now you must go, Samele. Here's a thousand zlotys. An emergency fund. Stuff it in your boots."

I did that, including also pictures of all the family. The money sifted away, but I still have the pictures.

"Thanks, Father. I'll be careful. I'm scared. I know you're right, but I wish there was another way. I want to be with my family."

"We want that, too," answered Dad and Uncle at the same time, using almost the same words.

"With God's good will, we will be together soon," said Dad.

"Yes," affirmed Uncle. Always believe that."

I hugged each member of my family. Tears flowed from Mother and Aunt as we embraced. My sisters contributed their share.

Brother Bolek hugged hard and long. We were good friends. It was difficult for us to part in a time of such uncertainty.

"Write to me, Samele," he pleaded. "We should keep in touch until you come back. I wish I could be with you. I wish you didn't have to go. I wish that there never would have been a Germany to do this to us!"

Now I could hardly stop a flow of tears.

"I'll write, little brother. Soon we'll be together again, like nothing ever happened. I promise."

The words read smoothly as I write them now, but they came out in short spurts and stops when I spoke them sixty plus years ago.

With Dad and Uncle it was first a manly handshake, and then they grabbed and hugged me, each in turn.

To Dad I said, "Good health and long life to you. Nothing will keep me away when this is over."

And to Uncle Pracowity: "I'll try not to get suspended this time so you won't have to pull strings for me. I thank you for everything."

And so I passed from the normal life of a protected adolescent to a bizarre existence of political prisoner, soldier pursued and caught by bombs and shrapnel and bullets, and finally deserter from an army that most of the time wasn't aware of my existence."

ROAD TO AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

I have never felt so alone as when I left my family, carrying only a rucksack containing clothing and some food. Destination, the city of Lublin, where there were known to be elements of the Russian army. A hundred mile journey to an uncertain future.

I felt somewhat prepared for military life. Since age fourteen I had been a member of *Pzyzbosowiere Wojskowe*, a youth organization which was a prep school for the military. We were taught the drills with wooden guns, but we learned to shoot with real rifles and live ammunition.

The regular Polish army at that time consisted of soldiers and officers in resplendent uniforms, bedecked with awesome swords and daggers, but few rifles. It was a facade of ferocity, with little behind that veneer. It was a horse drawn army in an age when cavalry meant armored motor vehicles carrying cannons and machine guns.

None of this was in mind as I set out on the four day trip. I headed eastward out of the city, filling my eyes for the last time, I thought, with streets and buildings which had been home and security during my sixteen years.

I was used to walking, but never such distance as now lay before me, and never with the feeling of being pursued. The backpack, not light to begin with, became heavier and heavier as I trudged farther and farther from home and family. The sense of adventure which I had felt on leaving our aunt's apartment, was replaced by feelings of uncertainty, of loss, of dread.

Not far from the city limits I heard my name: "Samek! Samek!"

It was Marek, a classmate in the gymnasium. He caught up.

"Where are you going," I asked.

"I'm not sure. I'm looking for the Russian army, to enlist with them before the Germans get me."

"Me too," I said. "The Russians are in Lublin. Let's go together."

We joined the crowds fleeing like us: whole families carrying as many possessions as they could fit onto bicycles, baby carriages, carts drawn by horses or cows, or by the people themselves. Those without wheels carried what they could in their arms.

After several hours, Marek and I had the good fortune to hitch a ride with a young truck driver.

"I'm running away from the Germans, also," he said in answer to our plea. "Hop into the back of the truck. I'm not sure where in hell I'm going to go, but you can stay with me as long as you wish. There's some people back there already."

Marek and I clambered into the crowded truck, grateful to be able to rest

while continuing towards our goal.

We were heading southeast on an unpaved country road, when we heard the sound of airplanes. There was no reaction in the truck until the motor noises became deafening, exceeded soon by the terrifying sound of machine gun fire.

Our benefactor pulled off the road and bumped over uneven ground into the protection of a small forest. He braked to a halt, and, without bothering to turn off the motor, leaped from his cab and ran wildly away.

Marek hitched his back pack and suggested we do the same. "This truck is too big a target," he said. "We'd best get the hell away from it."

"You're right, Marek." I still found it difficult to think or talk. "But let's stay here until dark. Then we can head out again. We need the road to find our way, but we don't need the light to be targets."

There were more strafing runs by airplanes before we reached Lublin, but we stayed away from the roads, just keeping them in sight if we hiked during daylight hours, ready to run for cover.

The roads now held more people than did the small towns which dotted our route. At the beginning, a formless chorus of voices crying out in fear and confusion had filled the air. Two days later the sounds had trickled to a whisper. The only loud voices were those of hungry, frightened infants and toddlers swept from friendly homes into flight over strange roads and unfamiliar country, their only shelter the arms of their parents and older siblings.

The terrified people had learned to separate into small groups, keeping well spaced apart to show a less appealing target for fighter planes searching for crowds to strafe.

Marek and I tried to keep to the fields and trees, as did many of the other fleeing Polish people. Not long after leaving the abandoned truck, we encountered a small family group lying exhausted at the edge of a sparse stand of trees.

"Please," begged a young woman as we came near. "We need help. My husband was taken by the Germans, and my father is completely worn out. We've been running for two days without rest or food. Can you please help my father to keep walking. The children try, but they are not strong enough."

"We have some food," I said. "Eat something first. Then your father can lean on Marek and me for a while until we find a place where you can rest more safely than here."

Marek and I took turns supporting the old man as we resumed our now less precipitous flight. A few hours later we came upon a fairly large stand of trees, where the family would be safe from the eyes of Nazi pilots. We pressed a little more food on them. They thanked us tearfully as we resumed our trek.

Free of airborne punishment on the outskirts of Lublin, the refugees crowded city streets with cries for aid for the sick and injured. Many of the homeless,

exhausted and terrified, were in a state of shock.

In Lublin at that time there was no organization, nor were there any answers as yet for the new arrivals. The army troops were soldiers trained to fight, not to aid victims of their enemy.

Marek, a gentile, went off by himself to find gentile companions. We had supported each other during the loneliness of flight from invading soldiers raping our city. But the glue of panic, which had held us together during duress, no longer had tensile strength. We parted friendly enough—but not really friends.

More than anything, now that I was alone, I wanted to eat a civilized meal at a regular table with proper utensils and hot cooked food. And then a proper bed, where I could sleep with all my senses at rest.

In an abandoned spot, protected from unfriendly eyes, I retrieved a few zlotys from the cache in my boot. Then I found a clean looking inn and sat at a clean looking table.

A clean looking man wearing a clean apron approached with a casual greeting. "Good day, young man. What can I do for you?"

"I would like the biggest meal from your kitchen. I haven't had a hot meal in four days of walking."

"From Warsaw?"

"Yeah. About two hours ahead of the Nazis. By now Warsaw must be a nonplace."

"It sure as hell can't belong to the Polish nation any more. If there still is a Polish nation."

He left for the kitchen, returning with a grand platter of food, He sat at the table.

"So what now?" he asked.

Tomorrow I'll look for the Russian army and enlist. I understand there are some units here."

"That's right," he said. "They're completely disorganized. Nobody knows what's happening,. The city is busting with fugitives, and the army doesn't know what to do with them or with itself.

"You eat now and then go upstairs for a good sleep. Here's the key to room 204. Tomorrow we'll talk about the price. Myself, I can't see charging regular price to people who have gone through such a bad time, so I let my wife handle that headache. She figures we have to charge, or end up without a home ourselves.

"So she'll do the charging, and then I'll tell you where to go for the army. I know a sergeant who's pretty levelheaded. He can get you started as well as anybody.

"Enjoy your meal. Relax a little. Don't eat so fast. We're pretty safe here."

Next morning I woke up rested and calm, until I looked out a window at chaos again. The streets were jammed with refugees running or walking aimlessly, or simply collapsed on the cold pavement. They had come looking for help; nobody could help them. Such an influx of displaced persons was more than the townspeople and city officials were able to handle.

Downstairs I found my new friend already setting up for his day of business.

"Hello, young man," he said. "Ready to go?

"Yes," I answered. "I'll pay my bill, and then I can go."

"First you'll have some breakfast. There's a lot to do, and you'll need a full stomach."

Before leaving the inn, we haggled over the bill. He named a ridiculously low price, and I took exception to that. Neither of us were used to bargaining in reverse, and we ended up laughing at ourselves. The first laugh I'd enjoyed in a long time.

"I hope you don't get into trouble with your wife."

"Oh, she's in the kitchen, and she likes your looks. She's not above making concessions from time to time, so we're in the clear."

He took off his apron and called out, "Maria! I'll be back soon! Come out for a while to watch the place!"

And then to me: "I need some air. I'll show you the way."

The innkeeper, whose name was Josef, guided me to a nondescript building which housed, among other things, a recruiting office for the Red army. Officers and noncoms had living quarters in the back of the building, and there Josef knocked on a door.

"Okay, okay," came from inside the room. "Let me put on my pants so I can come to the door like a gentleman."

The door was opened by a barrel chested giant, his torso covered with thick wiry hair, his face showing cautious anger at this early intrusion. The face softened when he recognized Josef, and he pulled us in with a hearty double handshake.

"Good morning, civilian," he said to Josef as we were drawn into the room. "It's always a pleasure to see you, even now before God has woke up. Sit down, sit down while I find a clean shirt."

"I need a favor," said Josef. "This is my friend Samek. He just walked here from Warsaw to favor the Russian army with his presence. Can you help him get set?"

"I'll do what I can, but things are screwed up with all these young people coming to join up, and all these older people coming to be safe. The recruiting office is completely out of control. I'll take this young man to a control point

where they are sending groups of candidates to Bialystock for training ... or something."

Josef accompanied us to the street, then went his own way back to the inn while we headed in another direction to the gathering place. I was placed with a group ready to march to Bialystock, a town only a few miles from Lublin.

GUEST OF THE SOVIET

At Bialystock, we were billeted in a former plywood factory, unused and in an advanced state of disrepair. Fortunately, our pallets were under roof. Unfortunately, the roof had more open spaces than closed.

The beds were makeshift affairs. Some of our group, ranging in age from fourteen to eighteen years, had thin piles of straw to shield their bodies from the raw cold of plywood sheets spread on earthen floors. It was a bitterly cold winter. At sleep time we covered ourselves with our jackets and thin blankets supplied by the army. The factory had no walls or doors, so we had the full benefit of invigorating outdoor living. Most of us were unable to appreciate such benefit or invigoration. We were just terribly cold and hungry and bored.

The open wood factory was a breeding place for uncertainty and rumors born of inactivity and boredom. Though young enough to avoid hard thinking, I couldn't avoid trying to sift through the "inside" information leaping from mouth to mouth during that time of uncertainty.

Some messages from the rumor telegraph system:

"We're gonna be trained with real guns! A regular soldier—I know he's a soldier because he has an almost new uniform—told me that World War 1 guns are on the way to Bialystock. Such weapons are only good for training, and who needs training as much as us new guys."

Path of Information:

"We're going to be shipped, I heard. "

"I bet you're right. I saw a lot of activity at the train yards yesterday. A bunch of new cars standing there now."

"I have it on good authority that we'll be sent to a real training camp in some of those cars. A friend of mine, he works at the yards.

He told me."

"No, they're gonna send us to German work camps to get rid of us. I heard somebody talking about it at the black market."

"Wrong! They're going to send us to the front. Maybe we can get rid of a few Nazis—if we live for a while. If we die, Russia will be relieved of the cost of keeping us.'

I grappled with the whys of our existence:

We're supposed to be soldiers, but we're not even workers. ... Maybe we're really *prisoners. We barely get enough food. We live in a building that is really no better than living out on the street. We have no uniforms, no arms, not even a canteen to identify us as even soldier candidates.*

And yet, we are free to come and go within the city. We can trade at the marketplace, providing we still have a bit of cash, or a watch or a bracelet to barter. ...

And yet, we receive no military training at all. Don't they want us? Are they afraid of us? Don't they realize we came here to help drive the Nazis out?

Where in this stupid life are there sensible answers? What kind of compensation is this for my abandoning family and home to fight in their army? Why must we wither here while the world consumes itself? Where are there answers?

Answers existed, but it took me four years to find a few of them.

A haphazard schedule of feeding provided us with dry black bread and hot water flavored with something to make it taste like soup. Actually, I could not have eaten the hard bread without the soup. The only way to bite into and chew the bread without risking broken teeth was to soak it for a while in liquid. Several kitchens had been improvised around the factory to produce the daily ration. I never found out how they were able to bake such rocklike bread.

Thus we were served by the Russian army for our first four months. I had an uneasy feeling that we were considered bothersome guests. We had been registered in Bialystock by the NKVD. The officials recorded our full names, education, home locations, but neglected to give us any papers of identity. I served four years in the army, almost lost the left leg, carried a bullet in my spine for more than fifty years, suffered severe shrapnel wounds to my right foot—but had no papers of identity until my last year of service. And those I managed to loose before heading to the United States.

We had no work to do, no training program to occupy our time. Discipline was not necessary. We were too cold and too tired and too frightened to cause problems.

Our major activity was playing cards, not as exciting as practicing the profession of war. Occasionally we foraged for food, usually an exercise in futility unless one had money or possessions to barter on market day. Farmers nearby came to sell their produce and meats once a week, while city dwellers sold their personal bounty for cash, or barter, or whatever was available.

My money cache was almost gone. Buying bread from villagers on the way to Lublin had made a significant dent in the bankroll. An occasional glass of milk, or bit of chicken, helped to deplete my resources. By the time I arrived in Bialystock, I was as impoverished as I would ever be.

I carefully observed the mechanics of the market place before participating . The Russian soldiers were eager customers for neck chains and wrist bands ... and watches! Most of the Polish recruits had such adornment. By the second month of residence, most of us had bare necks and wrists, and the sun had become our timepiece.

One day we were rounded up by soldiers in uniform.

"What's going on?" somebody asked a rifle-wielding infantryman.

"Don't know," he answered. "We got orders to bring you guys to the railroad yards. Maybe they got tired of feeding you."

"Is that so?" I asked. "We haven't had a decent meal these past four months."

"Yeah," he said. "You haven't done any kind of work, neither. Maybe they're gonna take you somewhere to learn you how to work.".

At the trains we were told we were to be shipped to a large city to work in a factory. Still not what we had come here to do, but the prospect of a change from our pointless existence brought a new excitement.

We were loaded into cattle cars. No benches. No amenities. The ride was unpleasant and unending. The hours seemed like days to me...and the days were forever.

We gained a pretty good idea of our status when, at every stop, uniformed muzhiks alighted from forward cars and fanned out along the length of the train, wordlessly threatening with guns and attack dogs. We were allowed at those times to relieve ourselves in fields, before this watchful audience.

I felt less a soldier heading to battle and more a felon being transported to punishment.

Just listening had become a fundament of my life since I was forced out of Poland. I seldom spoke. Jews were not much more popular with the Russians than with the Nazis. I felt my life depended on concealing my origins.

We had no real knowledge of our destination, but soon were able to make

an accurate guess. In the beginning many thought we were being shipped to Germany. But the temperature was dropping, and the direction of shadows on the snow suggested we were bearing north toward Siberia. We were heading to a place which could have inspired Dante's last limbo in his inferno, where consuming flame gave way to incredible cold. There was a measure of relief in this knowledge. At least Siberia was part of Mother Russia.

Three days later we reached the Volga river at the town of Vetlosan, where we were transferred to huge barges, each of which held a thousand young people and their guards. We sailed north, huddled against dropping temperatures made even harsher by the river winds.

Well, I figured, at least we'll be in a big city. Maybe we'll get more food, and warm places to sleep. And a heated factory to work in. And maybe regular uniforms, and proper training to become real soldiers.

SOLDIER IN SIBERIA

And then again, maybe not. At a point where the barges could go no farther on a diminishing waterway, we debarked to follow a foot path left from the time when boatmen hauled their vessels along the Volga river.

Two days on foot through hard crusted snow brought us to our destination, a city which did not exist, but which was identified by a weather-beaten wood plaque nailed crookedly to a tree with the name *Crascnie Ognie* in Cyrillic letters burned into the crumbling wood. The words translate to "Glorious Fire," a not inept designation in this frozen wasteland, where the cold was so intense that exposed skin felt like it was being burned.

Our "city" was a dense forest whose trees, called *Listvinita*, were so tall that they seemed to belong as much to the sky as to the ground. We learned that it would be our job to chop them down, clean them, and split them to use in building barracks. Our tools were hand axes and hand saws.

Totally inexperienced in the harvesting of trees and their conversion to building materials, we were young enough to face the elements confidently, and stupid enough to not realize that we were in a life threatening situation.

We had been forewarned. The commandant of our camp, in what turned out to be a rare appearance, informed us upon our arrival that we had come here to work and die.

"This is Siberia," he said. "If you intend to run away, you will not last in the woods for twenty-four hours. You will die of the cold or starve. The nearest train station is 500 miles away"

"Stepan! Stepan! Look at those trees!"

Early next morning I was shaken to wakefulness by a peer I had met on our river cruise from Bialystock.

He pointed towards a particular area in this world of frosted trees. Strange but familiar shapes drooped from lower branches of three trees. We approached cautiously until we could see the shapes more clearly. Almost at the same moment, we bent at knees and waist and retched onto the snow.

Before us swayed the bodies of three of our party, hanging from belts slung over low tree branches. Apparently they could not face the prospect so gently outlined by our commander, on top of the reality of this uncivilized, life threatening locale that was to be our home for who knew how long. We found more deserters from "army" and from life further into the trees. I still cannot decide who had the greatest courage: those who had the will to live until their final destiny, or those who had the will to seek their doom somewhat ahead of schedule.

Relieved of our belts by solicitous guards, we became adept at securing trousers with an elbow while working, or spreading our legs when we needed to use both arms so the pants would not fall all the way to the ground.

Our first project was to build final resting places for these no longer frightened soldier candidates who had lost—or had won—their first major battle.

The rest of us fell to relieving the barges of as many empty 55 gallon drums as we were allowed to take to our encampment. Branches trimmed from the felled trees would become fuel for fires maintained in the drums, allowing us to thaw freezing fingers and faces as we worked all day under the supervision of guards.

Our first major building project was a shelter for the commandant. It was a rudimentary affair, but solidly constructed. Each wall was made of three courses of tree sections set against each other. Each course consisted of trimmed trees placed head to toe, so that a narrow end lay atop a wide end, creating a more or less level section. Three such arrangements, set side by side to form each wall, provided a stable frame enclosing the inside space.

Chinks between the outer and inner logs were filled with anything that could be slightly melted by the storage drum heaters. The unfrozen snow and dirt and leaves were scooped and forced into the spaces, where the primitive caulking froze into a hard seal.

This packing worked well during the arctic winter, when temperatures dipped to 40 below zero. The summer climb to as high as 20 above, combined with the crude heating inside, caused problems which begged for tar and rope.

Eventually we received some refined equipment, including a sizeable generator and a huge bench saw with which we could square off the logs and even cut them into planks. It was no longer necessary to split the logs with a wedge. We had been able to do that because the trees were frozen so hard that a sharply driven wedge split the whole log cleanly along a straight line, with both new surfaces almost perfectly smooth.

We built barracks, a factory, and an infirmary in about three months. At night we slept on the ground. We learned to sleep in groups arranged in a circle, with our feet pointing inward. We overlapped whatever blankets we had to cover ourselves completely, and breathed out air from the mouth. The visible breath rose to form frost on the underside of the blankets, providing igloo-like insulation against the cold. Not as comfortable as a proper igloo, but it saved our lives. A leg or hand or arm, stretched beyond the cover as one slept, froze quickly. Even after we had buildings, in order to visit the slit trenches at night we had to wrap a scarves around our faces to avoid frozen noses or burnt lungs—or both.

Now we could live inside the barracks. We had a small infirmary, and a new headquarters building for the commandant and his aides—and a few barracks for us guests. There were fireplaces in the commandant's quarters and the infirmary. Workers suffering with pneumonia, bronchitis, and diarrhea now had better chance for survival, though many continued to die. Even the guard dogs were domiciled in their own building.

Our new barracks, represented the ultimate in residential architecture to us builders. With our own hands we had transformed imposing trees into exalted shelters. We each had our own bed. We were provided with warm army blankets. We could slumber with our heads outside the dry blankets, far more comfortably than in circular groups on hard snow with motley coverings over our whole bodies.

Those makeshift igloos had saved us from freezing to death, but they hadn't protected us from the tendency of snow to melt a bit under the influence of collective body heat. We often woke in the mornings with wet clothing, which froze as soon as we emerged from our arctic cocoons.

Now we had fine log billets. Along the sixty foot long interiors were three tiers of two foot wide bunks suspended from each long wall—sleeping accommodations for almost 200 persons.

A wide aisle down the center of the structure held three large drums in which we burned always wet tree branches and useless short off cuts of logs. For us, the accommodations were first rate. More, they afforded us a feeling of accomplishment, a perception that we had sorely needed the past four months in Bialystock.

The original group of workers was swelled by an influx of political and criminal prisoners from within Russia. We were all regarded as political detainees, especially since we Polish volunteers had been reclassified as Soviet citizens, with new papers identifying us as such. No longer classed as spies, we were nonetheless political prisoners. To add interest to my life, my papers had been lost; and I went through the war without credentials or dog tags.

Still, life was easier. Not easy, but easier than it had been.

As yet there was no running water. We built bath houses where we could sweat out the ingrained dirt and fatigue with burning fresh wood, whose sweet sap help to clear the stink of sweat from our nostrils. There was no soap. We bound leaves of the Listvinitza trees into bouquets with short pieces of limb as handles. With these we massaged our bodies until they glowed—or felt as if they did—and left our skin tingling deliciously.

Some years later, in the United States, I was asked how I hid the fact of being Jewish.

"I didn't advertise it," I said."

"But how did you conceal it in the shower room or bath house?"

"In the bath house, most persons draped a towel around their waist. The showers were easy. They were for officers only. We were allowed three minutes, one person at a time. I made sure I was either the first one or the last one. Before I became an officer, we plain soldiers were seldom able to bathe."

Our standard of living was ascending. From impossible and tenuous, it was upgraded to just short of subnormal. Meals of black bread and kiepetock were replaced at times by black bread and schav, a tasty dark green borscht made of sorrel. Sometimes we had bean soup, at times even including a minuscule piece of meat. Hunger was a constant companion. I could feel my backbone slowly moving forward, resisted less and less by a shrinking stomach.

Twice, hunters in our hut managed to kill a bear, and we ate royally until nothing was left but bones, which were saved to flavor our ration of soup the next day. Me, I never saw a bear in the forest, for which I was grateful. It was difficult enough with just the cold and snow as adversaries.

Other game animals, deer and elk and caribou, had been decimated by the natives in their quest for food. We never saw a bird in that forsaken sore on our planet, nor did I ever see a wild creature. Most dumb creatures were smart enough to run away—but humans were dumb enough, or unlucky enough, to stay.

The only friendly animal I ever saw during our sojourn in Siberia was a

large, gentle, well fed husky owned by a large, unfriendly, vicious guard who worked with a violent dog when he was on duty.

The sociable pet enjoyed freedom of the encampment, visiting soldiers in their infrequent leisure time and sharing a drink of vodka now and then. His master was proud of the animal's capacity for alcohol, which he had created and nurtured since the dog came to him as a puppy. The pet was allowed to roam at will, even during the few times that his master was away on a short furlough.

The last time the canine visited us was the last time he visited anybody. He should not have picked a day when hunger was at a peak in the encampment. And he should not have been so friendly when his master was so mean. We were hungry unto starvation, and he was food. We thirsted for vengeance on his miserable owner, and he was the unfortunate vehicle.

It happened quickly. One of the hardened criminal prisoners who bunked with us and who was a favored target of the detested guard, still smarting from an impromptu lashing the day before, garroted the poor animal with astonishing speed and skill.

I freely admit that the thought of fresh food erased any feelings of guilt. We were afraid to cook this meal. We feared somebody outside might smell roasting meat and inform the dog's master, condemning us to ignominious torture by the bereaved guard. We skinned and quartered the animal. So close to starvation was I that the raw meat was the sweetest I ever tasted. The inedible remains of our meal were buried that night deep in the forest.

One dull, cold day as I worked at trimming branches from a felled tree trunk, I was joined by a tall, fair skinned man who had not the stamp of Poland or Russia on his sad face. He manhandled the awkward branches as I hacked them from the main body, lugging them to a nearby clear spot and piling them to be burned later in the fire drums.

He worked without spirit and without speech. Though already hardened to the sight of woebegone, hope-abandoned prisoners, I felt sorry for this man. He didn't fit the stereotype of dwellers in this camp.

When we stopped for a few moments to eat our ration of black bread and kiepetock, I offered him a bit of meat I had been keeping refrigerated in an outer pocket of my jacket. He smiled an thanked me in American accented Russian.

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

"Oh, maybe three months or so. I don't keep a record. How about you?"

"I'm new. Sent here a few days ago from a Moscow jail. I still can't believe this is happening. I left a Russian wife and an infant son in Moscow."

The omnipresent guards signaled return to work, and we talked no more

that day. The next day we spoke a little as we worked. I learned that his name was James.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"It's crazy," I said. "I ran from Warsaw to escape the Nazi and join the Russian army—I thought. Now I realize that we were kept under open arrest in Lublin.

"They shipped us here—more than 2,000 men who thought they had joined the Russian army. Instead, we are labeled as spies."

"Not a very good place to live," he said.

"You should have seen what it was when we first got here. No shelter at all. At least now we have some huts that will be enlarged into barracks."

"How did you sleep? Right out on the snow? There's no caves here, no shelter except what you have built."

"That's it," I said. "We lived like Eskimos without the means or ability to make igloos or to find food. We still exist on kiepetock and black bread. But you already know about that."

A guard loomed suddenly in our vision.

"Work!" he said. "No talk. Give some attention to the trees! They're lonely!"

Lunchtime was a chance to talk again. We sat on a felled tree, comfortable after five hours of muscle shattering toil with hand axe and saw.

Back at work, we managed to exchange more words when the guard turned his attention to other laborers. I suggested to Jim that he might do well to settle in at our dwelling.

"How would I get transferred?" he asked.

"Just bring your blanket and mess kit after dark," I said. "They don't keep good records here, and nobody really cares what's going on. Escape is almost impossible, so why should they worry."

The next night Jim was settled in, and we were able to converse without guards listening. It was a release for me to be able to speak with somebody and not worry about anti-semitism. I sensed that Jim had not been a victim of the poisonous prejudice of the Russian peasant; I needed to be able to talk with another rational person. I felt I could speak more openly with Jim, though not enough to mention that I was Jewish.

"How did you get into this?" I asked. "Sounds like you were a real spy, seeing as how you are American and all."

"Maybe that's what they thought, too," he answered. "But it's not true. I came here to help build a Ford truck plant, a huge place near Moscow. We supplied all the equipment, and a group of engineers and craftsmen to set up the place and teach the Russians to make Ford trucks.

"I was here six years doing administrative work in the factory. I married a

Russian girl, and we have a year old son. God knows what will happen to them. The plant was nationalized by the Russians, and Ford recalled all their personnel. Except for me and maybe a few other guys who had married Russian women. We were classified as Russian citizens. I don't know what happened to the others, but I was sent here.

"I don't know how long I can last here. I never had to do hard physical labor at home or in this country. My health is not great. This cold and this work and the worry are wearing me down."

I didn't know what to say. He was twice my age, and not in good health. What hope could I give him when I had little for myself. At least I had the confidence of youth. And I had no grinding worry about dependents. True, my mind was crowded with fears for my parents and siblings, but they were able to take care of themselves, I felt. I didn't yet realize the extent of the dangers they faced.

The work and the worry and the lack of hope wore away Jim's resistance. It was not long before he contracted pneumonia, and there was no hospital to keep him alive.

In mid 1940 we received a main radio station for the commandant, and miles of wiring, and dozens loudspeakers for the barracks. By now we were a large camp, with many billets and a few small factories producing wood hospital beds which were shipped all over the USSR.

The radio supplies provided a path for my graduation from woodsman to electrician and radio man. Some months before we had been queried concerning our capabilities. I replied that I was an experienced radio man. This was not a lie. I had built a crystal set from a kit several years ago.

I credit the radio supplies with saving my life, since I was now excused from work in the forest in order to string wires along trees so we could hook up speakers in the barracks. Freed from the forest, with a staff of two assistants to supervise, I learned that it wasn't necessary to be thoroughly tired all the time. The responsibilities of supervising relieved me to a degree of the rigors of physical labor.

Though installing a communications network was a self-cancelling job under normal circumstances, Siberia's wind and snow perpetuated the need for us three technicians. The wire that had been shipped to the camp was poorly insulated with loosely wound paper scrap. Since it performed under low voltage, and since we had to wear gloves to defeat the cold, it didn't seem to pose a problem—until arctic winds tore at the loosely held paper insulation, exposing bare spots along the wire. Bare sections shorted out when the wind huffed and puffed, or fresh snow fell. Our tenure as electricians was assured.

We kept moving the wire upward to at least escape the ravages of wind powered drifting snow. There was no escape from fresh falling snow.

First we had installed the wire at shoulder height. Then we loosened and reinstalled it at arm's length. Extra work at first, but at least it was less taxing physically than chopping trees. The next step was to tug heavy, homemade wood ladders to boost the wires another meter or so higher. The wind tore at the ladders and threatened to push us to the ground as we mounted them. The wires remained at arms length.

We laborers, heavily guarded for twelve months, began to notice a decrease in the number of guards watching us. We learned, via the rumor telegraph, that warders were disappearing during the night.

I became acutely aware of a prisoner exodus when my two assistants failed to report for work one day.

"Are they sick?" I asked some men from their billet.

"Not sick. But not here."

"What do you mean, 'not here?'"

"We only know that they said late last night they were going to the latrine. They must have hid in one of the factory trucks going south."

It had become apparent that our commandant had not been quite accurate in his statement that escape was impossible. There was a railroad stop only 100 miles from our encampment. That's where the trucks brought their cargo, often including stowaways seeking freedom. Some malcontents now knew enough about the terrain to sneak away on foot.

FINALLY—A SOLDIER

It was a time of significant change. Our food was becoming more palatable and more plentiful. We were issued new uniforms. Guards and officers were less abusive when they spoke to us.

Members of the secret police (NKVD, later renamed KGB) began arriving. They took over seven barracks for offices. The buzz was that they were the advance corps for a new administration.

A week after their arrival, a new commandant appeared. We were all assembled to listen as he introduced himself and the current crisis.

He said: "We need soldiers to fight the Germans. We have learned that you are not Polish spies. My predecessor has been shot for treason because he denied you the right to enlist in the Russian Army."

The camp, he said, would now be closed to all except the murderers and other felons who were serving their sentences there. To us, who were finally cleared of the taint of spy classification, he offered two choices.

We could go to the *Sovkhoz* (Soviet collective farms) as laborers to help supply food for the Red Army ... or we could now join the Red Army.

"The procedure is simple," he said. "Think about it today. Tomorrow we will find out where you want to got and begin setting up the transfers."

The next morning, as our names were called, we called out our preferences: "Sovkhoz! Army!"

Most of us decided for the army. We knew that virtually all food went to the military, leaving farm workers to cope with near starvation. I figured I would have a longer, more comfortable future as a soldier than as a producer of food for somebody else. We were gathered into two separate groups: farmers, soldiers. Then our identity was established at two separate barracks: one for the food fanciers, and one for the would be heroes of the militia.

I figured I was in for some trouble.

"Papers?" the registrar ordered.

"Sorry," I answered. "I don't have any."

"What do you mean? Everybody must have papers. How else could we know who you are? Please check your foot locker and report back to me immediately."

"With respect, sir. I can't do that,"

"Can't do that? Can't do that? What kind of talk is this? Why can't you do it?"

"Don't have a foot locker. None of us muzhiks has so much as a cardboard box to hold our things. Most of us don't have anything to hold."

"Well, we need some proof that you belong here. Wait a moment while I confirm you."

Pointing to a man standing behind me in line, he asked: "Do you know this man."

"*Da*, he was in my barracks."

Though seemingly pleased, the registrar was diligent in the performance of his duty. He queried another man in the line, and received another positive answer.

"That makes it official," pronounced the official. "Get whatever you have together. Soon you will begin a journey to your new and vital assignment. "

New and vital assignment, indeed! I had never felt important enough to Mother Russia that I might play a crucial part in this war. In some ways I did so. Eventually I became an aide to Marshal Georgi Zhukov, the man who more than

any single person, engineered the demise of Hitler's regime. As a frequent lunch guest and confidant, I played a somewhat important part in the war.

One of the educational perks of working with the Communists was that we were constantly taught Communistic doctrineby trained hucksters, and we learned a new approach to statistics. They could add two and two and get an answer of five. We were instructed that all salvation was in the hands of government, that the state would take care of all our needs, that everybody would be equal, and that all would have a good life. We had to learn these things, but we didn't have to believe them.

Preparations were being made to move us. A good time for that. Men were dying of dysentery. Also, huge mosquitoes which carried malaria that they traded for blood they sucked from us, were taking a toll. The mosquito larvae could live frozen for years in frigid, stagnant bodies of water, which abound in Siberia. This year much water was defrosted, freeing these malignant killers.

We who had survived temperatures of twenty to forty degrees below zero, waist high snow, numbing winds ... were happy to go anywhere that was somewhere else.

We were loaded into army trucks, the first we had seen during our sojourn. We bumped and slid on wooden bench seats for about fifteen hours, arriving finally at a river. The largest barges we had yet seen rode the soft swell at anchor. There was room for us to sit, or even lie down. We were sheltered better from wind and sun then on our previous trip to the city-which-was-only-a-forest.

The almost comfortable barges bore us south for four days, arriving at an army camp in a town named *Buzuluck*, in the Ural mountains. There sat the Polish army, under the leadership of General Sikorski, but staffed only by Russian officers. Thus, after having traveled north and south in a two thousand mile loop that deleted more than a year and a half from our lives, those of us who had managed to live were finally able to become real soldiers in an actual army.

We lived in tents more comfortably than in the barracks we had built in Siberia. The weather was no longer a deadly adversary ... just an annoyance.

Again we trained with wooden guns. Again anti-Semitism boiled up. This Polish army's ground-level troops were mostly illiterate anti-Semitic people who could often be heard muttering the word, "Jewry." Jews avoided the company of each other for fear of being discovered. A Polish Jew did not need the mindless Nazis as life threatening opponents. Throughout history he had had his own private adversaries in Poland to threaten his well being—his very life. During normal times in the cities, he had the protection of fellow Jews, and was able to

live as what he was ... but always carefully. There were very few Jews in the army. They lacked the power of unity. They had to rely on the shelter of anonymity.

I was never, during my four years in the Russian army, deprived of Communist praise—for Communism. Trained hucksters conducted meetings whenever there was surcease for a time from the pressure of battle. They preached a litany of the wonders of life in the Communist state.

In no other social system, they proclaimed, were people so carefully cared for from birth to death. *(And death, they failed to say, was often granted prematurely by the state.)*

Nobody, they pontificated, ever had to worry about unemployment. *(As a result, workers had little interest in quality effort. Why strive for recognition when one is comfortable with the status quo.)*

Nobody ever had to be hungry. *(We had learned that in Lublin, and Bialystock, and Siberia, when we were regularly fed dry black bread and thin soup as often as once a day.)*

My luck began to run out. Soon after arriving in Buzuluck, I felt colder one night than I had ever felt in Siberia. I layered my body with as much clothing as I could get into, and still could not stop shivering. Several companions piled blankets over me—but my body trembled uncontrollably. Every movement of my arms and legs brought grinding pain. My head ached worse than the worst hangover I had every experienced. Then I retched, and shivered, and convulsed in a wild rhythm of affliction. Frightened comrades carried me, as I jerked and cried out, to the field hospital, where I was found to be in the grip of an alarmingly high fever.

When I returned to consciousness, I found I had been delirious long enough to miss an opportunity to live for a while in a warm desert of the Mideast. With the Germans already in Africa, Egypt, Greece, and Turkey, the British needed extra forces to bolster their army in Palestine. Sikorski's legion won the assignment.

Recovered from the malaria, I was sent to an army outfit at Stalingrad and given a Russian uniform. Everything was still disorganized. I hadn't been given any papers of identification. As long as I was a nonperson, I decided to change my name to one with a more East Slavic tone. I became Stephen Fiodrowic Flekorow, shedding a tear as I parted with Samek Flecker.

I was assigned to a canon crew. I weighed about 130 pounds, the smallest person in a group of muscular farm boys now planting death instead of wheat.

If I were able to lift a shell, its weight would have driven me into the ground. I made a big show of helping to lift projectiles into the canon's breech, holding my hands firmly against the missile while the others actually lifted. I think of

that ploy as "the pallbearer with a hernia gambit."

Dissimilar describes the troops in this outfit. We numbered Mongolians, Tagicks, Pakistanis, Tartars, Koreans, Chinese. It was bedlam as interpreters in each language shouted translations of the Russian officers' orders.

Some of these troops had come to Russia to embrace Communism. Some, like the Chinese, had been conquered by the Russians in World War One. They all had to join the army.

I had to be constantly on guard not to reveal my ancestry. Everybody was encouraged to report spies. I had had enough of the spy treatment in Siberia. Now I spoke only Russian—when I spoke at all.

Traveling west for a few days, we heard a language we all understood-—the roar of battle. We had reached the front lines outside of Stalingrad. We were divided into groups of forty to sixty men and given rifles which looked like they predated the first World War. Instead of belts for slinging, they were strung with rusty barbed wires which cut into our flesh. We learned to carefully remove the barbs with pliers. The remaining wire sling was not able to cut through our winter clothing, and so our blood was reserved for enemy ordnance.

We marched toward the Volga River. Bodies littered the ground in an action so fierce that it was not possible to remove them. They were continually violated by missiles from land and air. The Volga gathered dead and dying soldiers until its yet fluid waters ran red with their blood.

In the third day of battle, I was temporarily removed from the action; in fact, almost permanently removed from life. A German bomb struck close to where I was trading bullets with the enemy, and the concussion ripped my left leg from my hip socket. I lost consciousness, and have no knowledge of the next few hours except for what I was told later. I do remember regaining awareness to find a burly attendant sitting on my chest, another holding my feet (or foot), and a third pouring vodka into my throat directly from a bottle. I don't know whether that was before the operation or after, but I came to with both legs where they should be, one noticeably shorter than the other.

I learned that a Polish doctor had saved the leg by rejoining it to my hip with a "pin," a fastener poking against the skin covering my left butt. The head of the pin feels about like the size of a tennis ball, One can imagine the diameter of the pin. The replaced leg was a couple inches shorter than it had been, but a far better alternative than no leg at all.

There had been no anesthetic available for the operation, so it was performed au naturale. I can joke about it now, even about the rolling motion when I walk, about the intense pain for months after surgery, and the recurrent pain even now, all these years later. In spite of the constant discomfort, I still enjoy dancing and swimming.

The pain has one virtue. It reminds me of that doctor who saved my leg and my life. I was only semiconscious when he came to see me after the operation. I can't remember his visit, nor what he looked like, nor can I hear the sound of his voice. I owe him a debt I can never repay.

I was sent to a hospital in the Ural mountains. I was a patient there for three and a half months, most of that time immobilized by agonizing distress, my leg in a cast that provided lasting torture while performing its leg protecting service. In the beginning of rehab exercises, every faltering step I took clutched at my chest and lungs with such force that I literally could not breath.

When able to hop around on crutches, I was semi-discharged from the hospital. This meant that for another month I helped care for other patients, giving injections and performing other duties possible for an amateur nurse with one healthy leg and one sick leg.

This hospital had a huge roster of patients, and an unending supply of new battle victims. The nurses and aides were mostly gypsies who had fled Hitler's decrees against non-Aryans. They were efficient and warm in their work with the wounded. Before I was upgraded from helpless patient to helping patients, I was taught by gypsy nurses to read palms. They forecast from my palm lines that I would be wounded twice more, and then would travel overseas to a new life.

Meanwhile, I was still a Russian soldier, though damaged; but I lived to see the accuracy of the gypsies' predictions.

Before my discharge from the hospital, I was interrogated by the NKVD. They wanted to know my recent history, since my papers had been lost in Siberia and never found. Then they probed the extent of my formal education, and my knowledge of languages. I told them I could speak Russian, Polish, German, a little French, and some English. This ability was to be another salvation for me.

Stalingrad was lost by the Germans largely because they were not prepared for the Russian winter. Their tanks could not start, their support vehicles could not start, and their clothing was not warm enough for this unusually harsh winter . And they were critically outnumbered.

We saw that if 100,000 troops were needed, Stalin might send a million. He boasted, according to what we heard, that his army was so large that it could stack German soldiers' bodies to the heads of Russian soldiers, if necessary. Human life was not as valuable as was machinery and equipment. If a truck engine burned out, or equipment was damaged, somebody had to fill out forms to explain the failure. The moguls were paranoid about capitalist plots against communist equipage.

Human life did not merit such concern.

My next move after discharge from the hospital was a truck trip to a forward army camp in Rostov, where, with perhaps a hundred other persons, I was again questioned about the extent of my education. That led to an officers' training school in Moscow. After two and a half months of intensive study, I received my second lieutenant's bars as an interpreter.

Most of our indoctrination was political. In the matter of battles, we were instructed to advance behind the soldiers. We were obliged, they told us, to shoot any of our men who would not go forward when we attacked on foot. I hoped no higher officers would be close behind me in battle, because I had no intention of employing that kind of discipline. Nor did I relish the thought of being shot in the back by superior officers riding herd on me.

One possible destination for me was the Sixth Army, a force of about one and a half million men from the Ukraine. During a short furlough granted by our kind superiors. I heard of a pitiful twist of fate that destroyed the entire Sixth army, a force of about one and a half million men ingloriously wiped out of life and out of history. Before I was assigned, General Wlassov, commander of the Ukranian force, made a pact to defect to the enemy with his entire army and armament. We heard that he had gambled that Hitler would make him a German general, and that the Germans would defeat Russia and Wlassov would become supreme ruler of the Soviet empire. Instead, Hitler annihilated him and his army, according to our rumor telegraph.

Later, after having left Russia, I tried to find some solid facts about the defection to death, but was unsuccessful. Knowing that disgraced people usually vanished from print, I didn't look too diligently. I just wanted to confirm that almost losing a leg had saved me from losing my life.

MARSHAL ZHUKOV

Luckily, my next destination was to the army of one of Russia's greatest heroes. The most memorable officer I worked for during the war was Marshall Georgi Zhukov. He was a general when I was assigned to his interpreter group, his army constantly on the move pursuing the Nazis, helping to push them to perdition.

He was a brilliant officer and tactician, neither communist nor political.

I had long ago decided, after finally becoming a real soldier, that my best chance at salvation was to do willingly and quietly whatever job fell to me. I figured that would attract less attention than negativity and bluster. It worked well during the time I was a private.

It worked well when I became a second lieutenant under Zhukov. That first day, when we new officers each shook hands with him, he looked at me with a strange intensity, and held the handshake a bit longer than seemed normal.

I thought nothing of it, until later, when I learned that a son of the General, an aviator, had been killed recently in battle. Hardened warrior that he was, Zhukov must have been devastated as any father would be when a son is violently destroyed. He never talked of his son, but at times—during the heat of battle, during the stress of watching his interpreters manipulate prisoners to squeeze vital intelligence from them—I would see his attention stray for moments to another world probably peopled by his son and all casualties of war.

Zhukov greeted our group of about eighty new officers trained to interrogate prisoners. Our work was not a simple matter of questions and answers. We had been taught to seek a prisoner's trust by saying we needed information that would help us save lives on both sides. We had learned to fire rapid questions to prevent the prisoner from thinking about his answers. We had been trained to recognize conflicting answers to queries which, though worded differently, should have produced similar answers. We had to discern and remember inconsistencies, and to confront the subject in an attempt to force out honest information.

On our first day in Zhukov's army, we new officers were gathered on he parade ground outside the hq building. Called to attention, we were surprised to see General Zhukov step out. Directed by a squad leader, we each stepped up to the famous officer to state our name and receive a hearty handshake. Then he told us to stand at ease.

"You men have been trained to play a critical part in the coming battles," he said. "We're in a winning posture now. It's highly important that we get reliable tactical information as we drive the enemy back to their own country. It's our job to get the data from the increasing number of prisoners being taken. You know what we need. We know that we're going to beat those bastards. Do your job well, and you will help save the lives of many of your comrades."

After a few more minutes of pep talk, he did something that I would never have thought possible. The squad leader called us to attention and directed us to again approach General Zhukov, to again salute him, to again shake his hand. This time he greeted each of by his name. Eighty full names: first, second, and last. A total of 240 names, all correctly matched to the soldiers, all repeated in proper sequence.

I still find it difficult to believe, but I saw it and heard it with acute eighteen year old eyes and ears.

In the two years I worked directly for the general, he came to treat me like the son he had lost in battle. Partly because I was a willing worker, fast and

efficient. But more, we found a sense of unity soon after I was assigned to his headquarters.

He called on me more than the others in our interpreter pool to quiz prisoners, and he often sat quietly in the grilling room absorbing the responses of the hostages. His presence did not make me nervous, despite his exalted position and extraordinary reputation. Rather, it took some weight off my shoulders. We had no paper or pencils with which to record the yield of our interrogation. We had to remember the vital facts we unearthed, and separate them from what did not ring true. And this we passed on to Zhukov who again distilled the data and used it to drive the Nazis towards annihilation. And then he stored the main factors in his remarkable brain, to pass them on so they eventually found their way into written records.

Once, shortly after I began working for him, we both became involved in a particularly exhausting cross-examination. We were ready to move again to harass the retreating army. We had to keep the pressure high to get as much help as possible from the unwitting prisoner, an officer who we felt was privy to important information. And we had to do it quickly, because Zhukov planned to move against the enemy early next morning.

Nonetheless, the boss called a strategic halt.

"Time for some lunch," he decided. "Take this man back to his pen, and then bring some food."

Turning to me. "Would you like to join me ?"

I was dumbfounded. Never would I have thought to eat at the same table as such an exalted officer, even though the table was a makeshift desk in a nondescript interrogation room designed to intimidate prisoners.

Trying to react with casual deference, I clicked my heals, bowed slightly, and pronounced agreement and gratitude in a voice I found difficult to prevent from cracking.

Our rations were pretty much the same type of food I had eaten in Siberia, but more substantial. The kiepotok had more meat and vegetables than I was used to. And taste. The black bread was fresher and softer, no longer a threat to teeth. This is what the troops were fed; and ate the same food. His only concession to rank was a plentiful supply of Vodka, served with every meal.

The setting for this repast was only a bit more informal than his other meals, which he usually took in his office while working. Before the food came, he poured a short vodka for each of us into small, highly polished brass ammo casings.

"An appetizer," he declared. "Helps to enjoy. Calms one so the food goes down more smoothly."

We downed our "appetizers." His lips formed a smile of satisfaction. My lips

opened to a fit of coughing.

Zhukov smiled kindly. "First drink, eh?" he said. "I remember my son's first drink, God rest his soul. He choked even harder than you."

Embarrassed for myself, sad for his loss, I didn't know how to answer.

"You'll get used to vodka," he said. "It's a good companion after a battle, or after a session with a lying prisoner. Just use it sparingly. An occasional drink is good. Heavy drinking—that's bad. Believe me. I know."

Eventually I found out how well he knew. He had a prodigious capacity for vodka. His breakfast juice was a pint of the liquid, spread through the meal. He seldom drank at lunch, at least not when I ate with him.

More than half a century has passed since I worked for the general, but he lives in my memory as a giant intellect. Certainly he was the foremost leader of the Russian Army in this fight to save the world from Nazi domination. His eventual reward by the grateful political administrators of the Russian nation was virtual exile thinly disguised as a new assignment after the war and its heroes slipped into history.

Despite my close tie with Zhukov, I had to be constantly careful to speak only Russian during normal conversation with other soldiers. Thousands of Polish persons had joined the Russian army, and they were no more friendly to Jews than they had ever been. In this bitter present, they were even more capable of mayhem.

Our headquarters in Zitomer were in a church, where sleeping quarters had been set up for the personnel. Here again, a bomb found me and left a shrapnel calling card embedded in my right leg. (I was walking toward my bunk after a hectic day of questioning prisoners while their free comrades pounded us with aerial bombs and cannon shot. Explosions rocked the camp, but the church was untouched during the day. The aerial bomb which plunged into our building seemed almost like an aftertaste of the destruction which had already been dished out. Luckily, I was far enough away from the blast to be inconvenienced only by spent shrapnel, which was nonetheless able to inflict significant injury.

I was sent to a hospital, where the wound became infected and drained for several weeks. I was a guest for three months, eventually hobbling about with a pair of crutches I fashioned from branches of a tree that had been felled during another raid.

When discharged from the hospital, I rejoined Zhukov's forces at a camp about thirty miles from Bialystock. The Germans were running, and we followed close on their trail with the aid of fifty-passenger Studebaker trucks supplied by the United States.

Service under Zhukov was anything but sedentary. The odds were shifting when I was assigned to his staff. We were constantly on the move, pushing and

pursuing the not so masterly master race. Our aim was to obliterate the Nazi cancer from the body of Europe. The procedure was to draw the infection into as tight a mass as possible and press it back to its source, where it could be eliminated with the anti-venom of superior force. Massive injections of explosive metal attacked the now localized infection and cleansed it—except for the bacteria that slipped through the cracks to resurface weakly in future years.

We seldom stayed in one place more than three or four days before we moved on to liberate another area, destroying pockets of resistance as the Germans fled the lands they had conquered and were now losing.

Much of the time, as we moved closer and closer to Berlin, Zhukov rode in a truck, with me as driver. Sometimes we would leave formation to permit the boss a short recreational visit with a woman. In addition to his genius for battle strategy, he seemed to have a keen awareness of locations of recreation practitioners.

One day, as our convoy proceeded on its course, our truck broke down. Zhukov had the vehicle hooked up to a healthy van. We were towed for twenty-five miles to an area five miles from the home Zhukov wished to visit. He had our truck unhitched and pushed off the road.

"We'll catch up with you later," he told the convoy leader. "We've slowed you down too much already."

Then, as the line of trucks passed by, he said to me: "Can you get this thing to run, so I can see the girlfriend—or do we just wait for the next line of wheels?"

I opened the hood and looked closely at the carburetor. A small glass cup, part of the assembly, was cracked. I didn't know its function, nor did I understand the operation of the carburetor. But I did know that a cracked part was trouble. And we had no way to replace the part, or to glue it.

I also knew that the boss was most anxious to spend a short time at his private destination and then get back to the war. And that he relied on me to make that possible. And that I owed it to myself to avoid his displeasure. He was an eminently fair minded person, but frustration at a time like this could severely affect an attitude.

Swallowing hard, I asked: "General, can you spare a rubber?"

Wordlessly, he liberated a contraceptive from his wallet and handed it to me with a questioning look.

I worked the tube carefully around the glass cup and tied it in place.

"Let's try it," I said. The motor roared, and the truck bumped along a nearby side road. We were quite close when the contraceptive melted and we lost our protection. A short walk for the two of us, a short dalliance for the boss, and we hoofed back to the main road to hitch a ride to the fray.

His only reference to our adventure was a comment later while riding in the convoy. "Stepan," he said. "You're a blessed person. I do believe that, if you fell overboard from a boat, you would surface with a fish in your mouth."

FOILED FAREWELL

The war was approaching its end. My two friends and I were tired. All officers, all attached to the same headquarters, we had had no more than a nodding acquaintance until we met in a bar one evening when we were all on pass. We happened to sit at separate tables near each other, each of us drinking quietly and well, but not wisely. The inflow of Vodka loosened our reserve, and we began talking a little across the aisles separating our tables.

I'm not sure about Abe and Morris, but I needed to acknowledge myself. I would burst if I did not somehow shout out my Jewry, unafraid and proud. The distillate of potato going into my blood and my brain strengthened my ache to be me again.

Soon we joined at one table. The need for confession seemed to drive each of us, but we approached gingerly. The floodgates were parted slightly when, in answer to a question, I said that I had left Warsaw to join the Russian army. I felt a weight drop from my shoulders as I admitted I did so to escape capture by the Nazi and to fight back.

"Poland is my home, also," exclaimed Abe. "I was a veterinarian in a small village, just starting out when they hit us. It was no place for a Jew, I felt."

"You, too?" I blurted. "I am also Jewish. I've kept it secret ever since I left Poland."

"You don't have to worry about us," said Abe. "We're in the same pot of soup. Morris was a student at the Sorbonne when it began. He happened to be visiting his family in Poland at the same time that Hitler's friends dropped in. He also left just in time to avoid becoming a host. Our families are gone. We can't find out what happened to them. I don't know if we ever will. Hard thing. Hard."

Thus began a friendship that carried us through two attempts to walk away from our enlistment—the second one successful—and lasted through several decades in America.

Our troops were heading somewhere, Abe and Morris and I sat together, as usual, on the troop train. We seldom knew our destination until close to arrival. We learned that we were nearing the city of Tashkent. A narrow river near the city served as a boundary of the Soviet country of Uzbek, and a doorway to

freedom. It was time for decision.

Everything was in our favor. The Russians were relentless warriors and their officers were usually superior battle technicians. But they lacked the services of bookkeeper types, those quiet, lusterless plodders who could track the troops, their routes, their locations at all times.

Russia was destroying the forces of blitzkrieg. They kept excellent track of opposing armies. They didn't keep good track of their own armies.

Correction. They had cut through the chaos of invasion. They were now the aggressors, herding the Germans toward their final downfall. They now had accurate knowledge of the movements of their armies. But they kept better statistics of their ordinance than of their troops. The supply of soldiers was infinite and expendable. Machines and munitions were not.

The train slowed into a station labeled *"Tashkent."* When it stopped, we stepped out, along with most weary soldiers in the train, to get some fresh air and stretch our legs. We three stretched a little more energetically than the others. By the time the train shrieked a signal for the troops to return to their cars, we realized that we had walked too fast and too far.

A dilemma. Now we were stranded in a border town near an exit from Russia. Having learned in battle to turn adversity to advantage, we decided this was the time to sever our ties to Mother Russia.

First, however, the matter of food and rest. We felt obliged to avoid the town, though it was bereft of all but those too old or too infirm or too young to have volunteered—or to have been volunteered—for army service. We were now a short distance into a nearby forest, from which we had been unable to see the departure preparations of our troop train. We were caught by surprise when the shrill whistle beckoned us. Much as we wanted to rush back to the station, we were so tired that we knew we could not join the departure in time. We tried. We crept from the forest, carefully, utilizing every bit of cover between us and the village. This was time consuming procedure, and the train was out of sight by the time we approached the station. There was no agent in the depot. No townspeople. Only a normally appetizing scent of apples, marred now by a sickly sweet stench of decay

Abandoned by our army, we had to forage for our own food. A granary building stood nearby, as lonely looking as the station. Inside, the floor was covered with husks of grain and a few rotten apples in a corner. All the usable grain had long since been carried away.

Hunger invites accommodation. To us, the discarded grain husks, combined with water, could be strength restoring food. We cleared a corner of the combustible grain skin and dust, built a small fire with wood scrap, and filled a small abandoned pail with the grain reject and water.

The result, when we test tasted it, was a pungent flavored water that brought pleasant memories of the kiepotok we had heretofore regarded as unpleasant fare. Then I remembered what my mother did on occasion to improve the taste of soup that seemed bitter to her taste. She would drop a small bar of metal into the pot, commenting that it eased the bite of the dish.

I dismantled my hand gun and droped the metal barrel into our bubbling pot. Morris contributed his bayonet, and we prepared for our victory meal. We filled our mess cups, toasted each other, and swallowed deeply. To say it was not tasty would have been unfair. It was absolutely vile! We stared at each other like drowning men. I fought an urge to throw up. But it was the only kind of food available, and it had been a long time since we had eaten. We managed to ingest another gulp or two before the potent mess killed our appetites.

At least our stomachs had receded a little from our spines. The questionable soup, thin and watery in the pot, soon condensed to what felt like concrete blocks in our guts. Exchanging looks of panic, we each ran for concealed spots outside the granary to use for latrines. It was quite a while before we reassembled—weak, hurting, exhausted. I, for one, felt I might never have the courage to eat again.

We spent the night in the granary, which for us now represented an abandoned hospital more than a food storage depot. The wheat husks were kinder to our backs than to our digestive system, providing soft beds so we could suffer with at least some comfort.

Tashkent is famous in Russia for apple orchards, from which the crisp fruit is normally shipped throughout the country. Now there were no trains available to haul the harvest. Worse, there were no men capable of harvesting the produce. So the orchards were carpeted with apples in all stages of decay. The wonderful aroma of fresh fruit which normally infused the air now was corrupted by the riot of rot soaking the ground.

Next morning, still weak and hurting, we hitched our packs and guns and headed for the river which formed the border at this point. Our path went through several orchards, the first of which presented a challenge which only the original Adam could have understood.

Abe and Morris reached for a couple of apples not yet completely despoiled.

"Stop!," I hissed. "You don't know who may be watching. I would rather die than go back to Siberia. We're supposed to be close to the border. Wait until we cross out of Russia before you pick any of these things. We're too close to freedom to risk the horror of Siberia."

My friends stared at me in disgust, shrugged their shoulders, and we resumed our search for the exit. A four hour trek brought us to the narrow, riotous river which marked the end of Russia a that point.

"Not bad," said Abe as we set up a rest spot. "Not too wide. Awful lot of rocks."

"Yeah. And look how fast the water runs," said Morris. "We'd best rest a while before we tackle the crossing. That stream looks pretty mean."

Later we drew lots for the honor of making the first sortie into the wild water. Naturally, I won. I took off shoes and socks, and tied them across the back of my neck. Two steps into the flow the bottom fell about three feet, the undertow grabbed me and slammed me against a huge boulder, which I managed to embrace while the river kept trying to pull me free of the rock and then slam me back against it.

"Hold tight," screamed Abe. He and Morris formed a two chain to rescue me from the tide. I managed to link one hand with Abe's, and was pulled to safety, feeling like I had just been thoroughly scoured against a scrubbing board.

We had no choice at this time but to collapse after hanging our clothing on low tree branches. Soon as the wind dried the clothes, we dressed and hiked upriver and then down river, looking for a crossing point. The river was adamant. Swift water ran quietly until it approached the huge boulders. It reared up and frothed as it crashed against rock, splitting on impact and then reforming to repeat its attack against other immovable boulders. The stone obstacles seemed impervious to the wild water, but we could see a great many small, smooth pebbles which had once been majestic boulders. Eventually the water wore down the stone, so how could we objects of soft flesh and brittle bone win against such odds.

That night the murmur and crashing of water lulled us to sleep. We woke next day with patriotism renewed. It would be good to return to the controlled chaos of war. We looked forward to finding our units, where there was an umbrella of prescribed procedure to give us a little sense of reality.

Physically and emotionally exhausted, we limped back to the train station knowing that troop trains arrived there fairly frequently without formal schedules.

TREBLINKA

We rejoined our army without, as far as we knew, being missed. It was not unusual for a transport train to break down and delay its occupants for from several hours to a few days. Since we could have been on any of several trains, our delay was no doubt attributed to normal delay.

All the degradation we had seen since Hitler set out to destroy the world's tranquility was dwarfed by our next experience: our first look at one of his

demonic solutions to the problem of non-Aryans.

As we approached Treblinka, still pursuing the Germans, our senses were assaulted by a terrible smell, which permeated the air for miles. We were used to the smell of death on the battlefields, but never had we experienced a stench such as that which now enveloped us.

We encircled the camp's border of barbed wire, assuming this was a German headquarters. We were totally unprepared for the horror before us when we went into the camp. We had not known, until now, that the Germans were systematically killing Jews, gypsies, sexual deviates, and political prisoners, in a contemptible effort to rid the world of non-Aryans and imperfect Aryans.

Treblinka was a death camp, dedicated to mass murder made legal in Nazi Germany. We saw mounds of bodies, twelve to fifteen feet high: naked bodies of men, women, children piled on top of each other by the fleeing demons who did not have time to gas and burn them in ovens perched on a nearby hill. It was a sight that put hell to shame.

The Nazis had believed their own propaganda that they were invincible, and they were caught short by the advancing enemy. The victims had been shot in a final effort by the Germans to dispose of as many as they could before abandoning their commitment to Satan.

We dug huge trenches in which to place the bodies, covering them with lime and dirt. It was the worst time of my life. I still have nightmares, all these years later, of the charnel mounds.

Very few live prisoners were left at Treblinka. They were starved and weak. We fed them carefully so that their starved systems would not reject food, and we gave first aid wherever we could, but many died. There were a few women left among the prisoners. They ranged in age from forty to sixty. Younger women had probably been shipped to Germany to serve in work camps and to provide subjects for the inhuman experiments of Dr. Mengele, at Auschwitz.

Many of the prison guards did not get away from the camp. Since we did not have food enough to feed them—even if we felt like doing it—they were eliminated.

I had been in several battles, and I'm sure I killed. But I never saw my victims. This was different. I was not in the firing squads, but I witnessed some of the executions. No matter that I felt they deserved their fate; it was not easy to watch human life being erased. The stench of the dead helped to cloud our feelings of humanity.

In the short time we remained at Treblinka, I received orders to interview the commandant of the camp, a miserable, inhuman being. We questioned him for two days, during which the only thing he revealed was his name, rank, and serial number.

The commandant typified the arrogance of the Nazis. He sat stiffly erect, monocle in one eye, insisting that he had only followed orders. He knew nothing other than that, he repeated over and over.

Early the third morning he was brought into the interrogation room for a final try before we moved back into battle. He sat on a rickety wood stool with short legs to serve him with discomfort and deprive him of dignity. He was obliged to sit facing rigidly forward, while I moved in and out of his field of vision, partly to ease my stress and partly to increase his.

I started with a calm tone of voice: "How many guards worked at this camp?"

"My name is Commander Hans Kurtz."

Before he finished the sentence, I shot the next question. "Where is headquarters from which you received your orders?"

My name is Kurtz, commander of this camp."

I paced into his field of vision and asked in a louder tone of voice, "How many people have you killed here!"

"My name is _ _ _ _"

"Would you like to be treated the way you treated these people? We are willing to accommodate you!"

Further threats had no effect, but a tender of friendship by a Russian guard named Piotr cracked his reserve. Piotr, somewhere between six and seven feet tall, formed of about 250 pounds of hard muscle, was usually assigned to prevent physical problems when I questioned prisoners. He would stand quietly in a corner and observe. He knew how to read me, and could see my frustration. Fearing I might resort to pistol whipping, or begin screaming curses, he approached the commandant with arms outstretched in a gesture of friendliness.

"Tovarich!" he exclaimed, embracing the prisoner in a bear hug which broke two ribs, and caused Piotr's "friend" to spew out a surge of answers to the questions he had evaded for two days. He told us everything we wanted to know, including location of the main headquarters and how many men were there—a prime bit of information.

We learned from other prisoners of a network of spies created from groups of Germans who had settled in the Ukraine and other parts of Russia after World War 1. Still sympathetic to Deutschland, they had been recruited by the Nazis, fitted with Russian uniforms, and planted in the Soviet army to report its activities. Most of them drew the normal fate of spies. Others were imprisoned with little hope of parole.

Having gained as much intelligence as we could, we left medics and officers to care for the pitiful survivors at Treblinka and resumed our pursuit of the retreating army.

Marching toward Warsaw, I wondered how I fit into the jigsaw puzzle of European Jews. Physically, I was much better off than those caught in Hitler's web of genocide. Emotionally, I suffered profound guilt at having had to bear witness to the suffering of my people without being able to reveal myself and to offer personal comfort.

On our way there were several minor skirmishes, but very little resistance. Not many planes swept the skies. Sometimes they strafed us, but no more bombs fell. A week's travel brought us to the outskirts of Warsaw, were we were ordered to dig double sized trenches and settle in. We had no orders to go forward, so we surmised that Stalin wanted us to wait for German soldiers to eliminate more Jews before we poured in to take the city.

In the distance we could see flames and clouds of smoke, and again came the grisly stench of burning flesh. Later we learned that this was the time of the Ghetto uprising. German trucks and trains were committed to transporting only war machinery and artillery. They carried no civilian prisoners. Massacres eliminated the need for such transport.

We remained in our trenches until after the new year, and then took Warsaw.

Again perdition. The Ghetto was a wasteland. During the week we remained before continuing east, I tried to trace my family. Our house was gone. I found out from somebody who had known our family that my sister had married an engineer who owned a small factory in which he had been forced to make trailers for German trucks. I learned that they had lived in *Minsk-Mazovieski*, a town about thirty miles from Warsaw.

With two soldiers, I went to their home. It still stood, but the small factory had been burned to the ground. A man responded to my knock on the door, regarding me with curiosity.

"Can I please see the owner of this house?" I asked.

"I am the owner," he replied.

"No, no," I said. "I mean the real owner."

Whereupon he replied: "Oh! Thank God, the Germans killed them before they could run away."

A white flash blazed before my eyes, shutting out everything but that leering face in front of me. I didn't realize my hand was on my gun until one of the soldiers with me gripped my shoulder.

"Don't do that," he said. "You know that we can't kill civilians now except to defend ourselves. You've got a good record. Don't ruin it."

Then he turned to the new home owner. "What part did you have in this?"

"I did nothing," he answered. "I worked for the factory owner. After the Germans killed him and his wife and their child, they told me I could keep the house."

"You're a liar, and you're stained with the blood of that family. I could shoot you myself, but you're not worth the bullet. We have friends in Warsaw, and they will learn of this. You better watch your back from now on!"

On the other side of the Vistula river, near our headquarters, I found a man who had been a student in the gymnasium during another lifetime when I was a student there also. He knew of my other sister's death.

"She and your brother were partisans in the ghetto," he said. "She died in the explosion when she leaped onto a German tank and fed its driver a Molotov cocktail.

"I don't know what happened to your brother. Your parents were taken by the Gestapo."

During the week we remained in Warsaw, I advertised in a Polish newspaper and on the radio to get information about my stepsister and her husband. Without success. I can only surmise the fate of my parents and of stepsister Tola.

We moved forward once again. General Zhukov's goal was to take Berlin.

The only opposition to our advance were unsupervised enemy outfits which had not kept up with their main army. The Luftwaffe was gone, and there was no more artillery to oppose us. The German army seemed completely demoralized. An occasional airplane strafed us as we thrust to Berlin. When we arrived, the city was in flames.

I wonder sometimes how we survived the ghastly condition in which we lived during our battles and advances. We were unable to shower for weeks at a time to rid ourselves of the filth and mud and sweat and fear that was our daily ration. We sprayed our bodies with disinfectant to discourage the biting bugs which we could not escape. My skin itched constantly, and was raw wherever I could scratch it.

For me the immediate significance of our entry into Berlin was personal rather than global. First thoughts were not those of a soldier in a victorious army. I gloried in the thought that soon I would be able to clean away the crud of conflict in a civilized shower room.

The Germans were not yet ready to cooperate. Fantasies of unlimited water and soap yielded to the reality of last-ditch resistance by the Nazis. We had to neutralize the enemy building by building. We owned the city, but now we had to secure it with the lives of more troops.

Two days after we arrived, I was sent on a foot patrol, accompanied by two cannoneers, soldiers who carried machine guns. I was armed with a handgun and a compass. As we proceeded along a street near headquarters, we concen-

trated on a building farther ahead from which emanated gunshots. A small group of Russians, coming from a direction opposite ours, was exchanging fire with the occupants of that structure. We had come this far without challenge, and advanced double time to aid our people. My two comrades rushed along sidewalks on either side as I ran bent almost double along the center of the street. Gunfire exploded from a building that we had just passed. My two soldiers were killed, and I was shot in the back. I lay motionless, hoping they would figure me for dead. Their attention was drawn to other Russians behind us who were able to wipe out the nest with hand grenades. I was given first aid and rushed to a field hospital, where the wound was sterilized and bandaged.

I was fortunate, they told me, that I was not paralyzed. A doctor reassured me. "You're very lucky. From the position of the bullet's entry, we think it probably lodged near the spine. We can't be positive, because we have no x-ray equipment, and we don't want to risk exploratory surgery at this crude hospital. But you should be okay for a long, long time."

Fortunately, the pain was neither debilitating nor of lengthy duration. Within a short time, I returned to active duty.

The bullet remained in my spine for fifty years. I lived alone when it caused such constant, debilitating pain that I had to have it removed in a delicate and dangerous surgical procedure

Upon returning to headquarters, I learned that Eisenhower was holding back from entering Berlin until the Russians had completely subdued the remaining German soldiers. There had been a lot of hand to hand combat, and Eisenhower apparently wanted to keep his battle weary soldiers distanced from that final action.

Though he didn't need an interpreter staff anymore, General Zhukov kept me as an aide. That bolstered my confidence. I was not as withdrawn as I had been from Siberia till now. I was still careful to hide my ancestry, because I would have been no less a Jew if certain hostile soldier comrades found out my "Jewry," despite that I was generally well respected.

During the turmoil of the first few days of occupation, our troops went wild. Soldiers committed unspeakable acts of rape and pilferage, a common release of battle tension for victors throughout history. This went almost unchecked for three days, until orders filtered down that there was to be no more ferment instituted by our side. To disobey such orders was to invite capital punishment.

I dipped an oar into that violent stream the second day after I returned to Berlin. I saw a Berliner getting ready to start the motor of a fancy BMW motorcycle. I approached and asked the driver how long he had owned the bike.

"Three years," he said in a frightened voice.

"You've had it long enough." I produced a paper that the motorcycle was

requisitioned by the Russian army, signed it and thus became the owner of my own transportation. I didn't know how to drive, but my men did. It became part of a fast-growing fleet of vehicles requisitioned for army use and for personal use. One driver who obtained an American Jeep was so proud of it that he lovingly polished the whole vehicle, including the engine.

Assigned to headquarters, I was able to eat wonderful American food. I had never tasted Spam, and considered it a dish for the elite. And when I was given strawberry jam to spread on black bread, I felt I had reached a pinnacle of epicureanism.

American soldiers were generous, plying us with chocolate, which we remembered from civilian days, and white bread, which was a previously little available delight. When they offered us a cigarette, they would usually say, "Here, take the whole pack!"

There was true camaraderie- between the Russian and Americans troops. We frequently sang and danced to the accompaniment of the Russians' balalaikas. The division of Berlin ended the good-fellowship. Distrust and suspicion followed separation. Propogandists in both camps helped to destroy the amity.

Despite the flush of victory by the four leading Allied countries, there were serious differences in their attitudes. Montgomery tried to grab the spotlight of victory for England. The French did not participate in that competition. They were mainly interested in having a good time after the rigors of war. But they couldn't endure vodka, and there was little else available.

General Patton, an uncompromising and controversial officer, wanted to oust the Russians, but President Truman would not allow this threat of a new war. Once, at a gathering where a toast was proposed to long life for Stalin, the American maverick threw down his glass and said, "I don't drink with pigs!"

Zhukov, who did not understand English, looked to his interpreters. They all had turned away and acted as if they had not heard the insult. Then he looked at me. I shrugged and reported that Patton said he was angry because of doctor's orders not to drink alcohol.

Zhukov raised a single eyebrow, a signal that he did not really believe me. Had he raised both eyebrows, Patton and I would have been in trouble.

A few Soviet officers defected to the Americans. Even a few were too many for the masters in the Kremlin. They recalled divisions back to Russia, replacing them with fresh troops, well dressed and trained to spread the gospel that a good life awaited the battle weary-veterans when they returned to their grateful homeland.

When questioned by the Americans about life in Russia, the newcomers frequently stumbled through their ignorance of American life style. One GI asked if they had oranges. A quick witted muzhik smoothly answered, "Oh sure! We

have factories which produce a lot of oranges."

An American described his seventh floor apartment. He was asked, "If you drink milk, how do you get a cow up all those stairs."

We also talked with Jews liberated from concentration camps. They were usually reluctant to speak of the abominations they had experienced. I vividly remember a beautiful young woman, about twenty years old. Her face was sublime. But her legs were monstrous—bloated and misshapen—the result of mindless experiments by inhuman doctors in a concentration camp.

Since there was little need for an interpreter these days, I accepted a new job that Zhukov offered me, involving elements of educational travel and contraband smuggling—both blessed with government approval.

I was beginning to feel useless when Zhukov called me into his office.

"Stepan," he said, "I need you to do a special job. You saw that huge supply of medications in the American warehouse at Templehoff Airport. They can't use it without their government's approval, so I offered to take it off their hands."

"We could make good use of that stuff," I commented.

"Exactly. But it's a big job. You'll have to change all the labels from German and Latin to Cyrillic. It's lucky that most of the medicines are in fifty pound containers. If they were in regular dispenser bottles, we couldn't live long enough to change all the labels."

"Where will we send it?" I asked.

"Moscow. I've already requisitioned several trucks for the transfer. You'll have to make a few trips. And you'll need to find a lot of padding to protect the glass jars."

"How many men will I have?"

"You tell me, Stepanovich. "You're in charge of this operation."

"I figure I should have at least two men for each truck. That way we can drive day and night, one man driving while the other one sleeps. On normal roads in normal times, I'd figure four days each way. Allow two to four days extra because there are more holes than flat places on the roads."

Fair enough," said the marshal. "I'll have the men assigned to you immediately so they can help with the labeling.

"Contact Captain Rosenbloom at the warehouse. He's in charge there, and he said he would help wherever he can. I'll call to let him know you will be in charge of our work. When will you be able to meet with him?"

"I can go right now. There's no prisoners to question, and no enemy to fight with. Hell, I've got more time than I know what to do with."

Two hours later I was accompanying the American officer in a survey of the dimensions of the task.

The captain, who, I learned later, had been about to begin medical practice

in New York when the army tapped him, was a pleasant, outgoing person who still thought more as a civilian than as an army officer. During the weeks I spent at the warehouse, I saw a camaraderie between him and his men, coupled with mature respect for him and for discipline.

The first problem was how to cover the old labels with new ones. We cut sheets of paper slightly larger than the German markers, so that when glued, they would completely hide the originals.

Problem: no glue. By the time I had prepared several hundred labels and tied them to the containers with string, the Americans had searched out a source of glue for us. While I was an accomplished linguist after months of interpreting, I had no experience in Latin. With the acquisition of a Latin to German to Russian dictionary, I became an instant expert.

We could carry only one layer of the fragile containers in each of our seven trucks, protected by surrounding blankets and mattresses to avoid breakage as we bumped over ragged roads for three or four days. We had to pass through three borders between Berlin and Moscow: the East German border, the Polish border, and the Russian. At first it was not difficult. Our trucks had been specially marked with headquarters identification on the sides. But the borders became more and more restrictive with each trip, and getting through became more and more complex.

By the time we were preparing labels for the third trip, I had become quite friendly with the officer in charge of the warehouse. A new York physician, he was startled one day when I used the word, "Amhu," (an obscure word which told him I was Jewish.)

"Jewry?" he said unbelievingly.

"Yes," I said. "You're one of only four persons here that know it. I've been in this Soviet army for four years. I've taken bullets three times, and I still carry one in my spine."

"Sounds like you've had your share," commented the American,

"You might say so," I answered. "Now I want out. The borders are tightening up, and I don't think this job will last much longer. Stalin is recalling engineers and technicians to Moscow. I don't want to be caught in that tide, and I've got two Jewish bunk mates in East Berlin who want to go with me."

"Let me think about it," he said. "Not about whether or not to help you. That's a given. I just have to figure how to help."

The next day he said: "Get those two men here with you on your next trip. I'll have civilian clothes for you, and a jeep and driver to take you to an American army plane heading for the west."

The problem was to get my bunk mates past the East Germany border. They were Dr. Joseph Nusbaum, a captain, formerly an Oxford scholar, who had been

caught up in the war when he had gone to Poland to visit his parents; and Lieutenant Jonas Kwaskiewski, who came from Crakow. We had met in a bierstube, where, loosened by the contents of a few steins, we had astonished each other by revealing our common ancestry.

Getting me across the border was easy, since I led the truck fleet. Getting my two comrades across could be relatively easy—or it could be deadly for the three of us.

The scheme hinged on General Zhukov's practice of signing a pass for one officer, accompanied by fourteen soldiers, two drivers for each of our seven trucks. Using one of Zhukov's pens, I forged a "3" out of the "1," a feat made possible by my experience with writing labels.

We would have to bluff our way across the border and into the American zone. The guards were tough, dedicated East German communists called "Stassi," and not easily handled.

I had cautioned Nusbaum, who sat between the driver and me, and Kwaskiewski, stationed in the back of the truck, to say nothing, while I pretended to be asleep.

A guard asked for my papers as we pulled up in the lead truck. I shook myself as if he had awakened me and reached for my gun while bellowing, "Why did you wake me? We've been up and back here four times already. You should know us by now. Don't you see the headquarters markings on the trucks?"

I stiffened my body erect so that the guard could see the Stalingrad medal—a badge of distinction—on my uniform. He stammered an apology and waved us on. Sounds simple in retrospect, but we were all pretty well shook up. One slip, and we would have been three warriors "missing in action."

By the time our seven truck convoy arrived at the warehouse, we were breathing normally again and worrying about the next step, which was not yet known to us.

START OF THE ROUTE TO AMERICA

That night the truck drivers were sent to their lodgings with leave authorized for the next day, ostensibly to let them rest after the hard drive from Moscow. The American officer produced dark colored civilian suits for we three defectors. I still wore my huge boots in which I carried the family pictures I had cherished through all my troubles. He called for a Jeep and a driver. As we boarded the vehicle, he gripped my shoulder gently, and said, "You'll be OK."

I was astonished by the driver, a black man. I had never seen a black person in an American uniform, and I had a sudden vision of being driven back to the

East Berlin border to be handed to the Russians. The driver sped directly to Templehoff Airport, where we three and three U.S. officers boarded an American army plane bound for Munich. Our benefactor had engineered a complicated escape for us with seemingly simple strategy. We were gratefully aware, however, of the red tape he had to circumvent in order to generate our flight to freedom. We are still grateful a half century later. That gratitude will last as long as I live.

In Munich we were interrogated for two months, distinguished as among the first Russian army deserters to defect to the United States forces. We lived well in barracks in the center of Munich. We ate in a canteen where we later met other Polish and Russian escapees. Few had made the transition with as little trouble as we had.

Not long after we were debriefed, I was sent to Furth to interpret at the Nuremburg trials. I worked there for only two days. I had spent four years of gut wrenching fear at front lines, of tension filled sparring with prisoners just behind he lines. I had suffered wounds and illness whose effects had been life threatening and never ending. I had had enough of inhumanity. I didn't want to witness a recap of what I had lived through. I pleaded that my English was not equal to the demand. That was the key factor in my release.

My two companions, Abe and Morris, and I lived quite well in Munich. We were assigned a house—two floors and a basement—which became the focal point on an international business which benefited a few savvy American soldiers, a pioneer community in a mid-eastern desert ... and us.

During the day we had a maidservant to cook our meals and clean the house. At night we became a storehouse for guns and ammunition retrieved from caches in and around Munich.

The business found us. We were quite content to live for the present as burghers, subsidized by a wonderful people, tenants of a fine home with a supply of servants available to us. We were supplied with pocket money, which we regarded as compensation for helpful intelligence we were able to contribute to our hosts. Our existence was simple and satisfying. We lived comfortably as Jews.

Indeed, our house became a gathering place for Americans, many of them Jewish. One evening, as we began to straighten things up after the last of a group left, Morris brought the work to an abrupt standstill.

"How would you guys like to make some serious money and at the same time help our people in Jerusalem?"

Abe and I sat on the nearest chairs and gaped at Morris.

"Some Americans know of caches of small arms and ammunition buried in

fields and ditches outside the city," Morris continued. "Some of the soldiers have relatives in Jerusalem, and know that their people are desperate for guns and rifles and bullets to protect themselves against terrorists. They're not looking for charity. They will pay, and gladly."

"How do you know this?" Abe asked.

"How would we fit in?" I asked.

Morris continued. "The Americans can dig up the stuff, but they need a place to store it. We have a big basement, and more space upstairs. We have freedom of movement that our friends have not because they are attached to administration and police services.

"I don't know how they found out about the guns. Maybe one of them tracked down a rumor. Maybe one of their interrogators was told about the buried ordnance, and let some details slip out of the file envelope. Or maybe a German prisoner reacted to the Americans' generosity and gave a soldier the location of some of the stashed stuff.

"Point is, they have the information and we have the storage."

"But that's a dangerous thing," Abe said. "We could get thrown out. Where could we go. Siberia? That's the only place nobody would look for us. Because that's where the Russians would stick us anyhow, if they didn't shoot us.!"

"From what you told us," I said to Morris, "a lot of people seem to know about the buried guns. Chance are, a lot more in higher places are aware of it. They'd have cracked down on this if they could use the guns or ammunition. But they don't need used arms. They have all the top quality stuff they need. And they have only to ask their government, if they need more. I don't think anybody will bother us."

We discussed the risks and rewards all the next day. Emboldened by a bottle of wine at dinner, we decided to take the chance.

We appointed Morris to organize himself as head of a committee of one to arrange the transfer. He contacted his source and helped to dig up a cache at night and crate the contents, which were then driven to our house under cover of darkness.

The driver had a pass which got him through whatever checkpoints hampered progress. He traveled the roads with only parking lights on, until he knew a check point lie ahead. Then he turned on full light power to avoid suspicion.

This man had done his homework well. He had spent a lot of time traveling the route, learning the checkpoint locations, forming a friendly relation with soldiers stationed at each point. Morris was able to ride in the back of the jeep, well concealed in case of a search. Nobody searched.

At our house, Morris left his concealment to open the door and signal Abe and I for help. The driver became an instant friend, and we manhandled the

crates to their new stash in our basement.

After the work was done, we relaxed in our living room with drinks and conversation.

Abe: "What now? What happens to this stuff."

Driver: This is only the beginning. There's a lot more to come. Sometime along the way, when there are enough arms for shipment, we will inform our contacts. They have men here, ready to buy the stuff and ship it to Palestine."

"There are probably a lot of people to pay off in this operation," I commented. "Whatever comes in will have to be spread thinly. Is that not so?"

"True," he answered. "We're not in this to get rich. All we want is enough to get the work done, and maybe a little left over for a carton of smokes or a bottle of hooch. We assume that you feel that way, too."

"You're right," Morris assented. "We're pretty well off now. The future will work out one way or another. Now we should help those people who are trying to build a homeland for all of us, whether we live there or not."

"Agreed," assented Abe and I in one breath. "So what happens now."

"We bring in a lot more stuff," said the driver. "And we keep doing it as long as we can find the hoards. Somewhere along the line, the Palestinian Jews will contact us,and they will handle it from there.

"But right now we have to identify these cases. We'll paint 'Machinery' on the wood. The size and weight will determine the kind of machinery: farm tools, building equipment, small motor driven apparatus. Hell, I bet we can get away with kitchen utensils.

"All the guns are buried in grease under several inches of sawdust. Nobody will bother to dig into dirty sawdust...we hope."

For me it was deja vu: cutting stencils of individual German letters, and using them to spell the supposed contents. Not much different from changing medicine labels from German to Russian that had occupied much time not so long ago in a different existence. My experience with those forgeries made me an uncontested choice for head of the art department of our clandestine organization.

In short time we had crammed a capacity load of contraband into the basement. We had "identified" all the crates. Our American contact, a savvy artillery man, now part of the provisional government, regularly assured us that the Palestinian Jews would soon be in touch with us.

Like the meteorologist who kept predicting good weather until nature finally surprised him by letting some through, our friend kept assuring us we would be contacted—and one day it happened. He came to us with a short, balding, beefy individual, as ordinary appearing as anybody I had ever met.

The meeting did credit to the procedure of polite society. The American

introduced us to the Middle Easterner who, we learned, spoke German, English and French with a muted Yiddish accent.

"Just call me Aaron," he said when the Yank faltered in the introduction. "It's not my name, but I like the sound.

"May I see the tools and equipment?"

We descended the basement stairs, allowing him to lead so he could get a direct first view. He stopped at the bottom stair, hands in pockets, head turning slowly as his eyes panned slowly from left to right.

"Good! Zaire gut! I hadn't hoped for so much," he said. Turning around to us: "I won't look into any of the cases. Your friend comes well recommended by his relatives in our country. And I'm a trusting soul. It's only fair to mention that I and my people become very unhappy if we are cheated. If that happens, we have a long reach, and can make cheaters more unhappy than we are. You're friend knows of other dealings that we had to deal with disagreeably. We're not—how do you say—patsies. Now let's forget such talk. I feel very comfortable with you people."

"Thank God for that," ventured Abe. "We feel good to be able to help with this. We would like it to stay that way."

"Good," said the pioneer. "So let's discuss price. It cost you money to learn of this material, and more for the stuff to crate it. And I know what was demanded from all of you in terms of labor and danger to bundle it up and get it here, and drag it into the basement.

"To me, and my compatriots at home, you men are heroes. You deserve compensation. We are not wealthy...but we're not impoverished. Tell me how much money you want."

Morris answered: "I think the others will agree that we want only enough to replace what came out of our pockets, and maybe a little more so we can buy a corned beef and a knish now and then.

"I admit that, originally, I figured we could get a nice chunk of money out of this enterprise. But the thought of helping you to establish a homeland after how many thousand years of Diaspora—that became the most important thing. We may never see a state called Israel, but we know it will happen, and we know it will be as important to as is the land we grew up in."

We all began to laugh.

"What kind of way is this to bargain?" I couldn't help thinking of the parallel with the time—ages ago—when the innkeeper argued for less, and I for more my first night in Lublin.

A couple of nights after we met the arms agent, he returned after midnight with a huge truck, to get the "machinery." In the ensuing few days, he returned twice with his crew to upload from basement to truck.

I put away my share of the purchase price against the time I would have to leave Munich and start a normal life. I planned to go to Jerusalem, but I had nobody there. When the time came, Abe and Morris had relatives in the United States. I had nobody nowhere. I decided to accompany my friends to the U.S.

When the time came for us to choose a destination, we opted for America. I knew nobody in that country, but my two comrades had relatives there. I figured I could always go to Palestine from the U.S., but at least for now I had these two close friends. Joe Nussbaum had a brother who worked for the post office in Los Angeles, and Jonas Kwaskiewski had two sisters in New York.

I got in touch with Dr. Rosenbloom, who vouched for me as a sponsor and paid $141 for my passage. In December, 1946, we were taken to Bremenhaven, where we boarded an American Victory ship for a fourteen day trip to a new life.

That cruise was a reminder for me of the misery of Siberia. The ship took on water, and we landlubbers were sure it would never last to landfall. The smell of gases coming up from the engine room was so overpowering that we slept on deck despite the extreme cold. A terrifying storm between France and England caused what my companions considered terminal sea sickness. They never forgave me for consuming a great deal of what they regarded as nauseating food to escape the ravage of motion induced misery.

SANITY REGAINED

January 17, 1947, a date that ranks high on my calendar of anniversaries. At 4 A.M. that day, we docked at Pier 153 in New York, after having had our first glimpse of the Statue of Liberty, barely visible through the cold fog. My friends went off with their relatives, and I was alone with only the consolation of $128 dollars in my pocket. I got into a taxicab and asked the driver to take me to a hotel. He drove me to a small hotel at Broadway and 103rd street, where I took a room and went to bed utterly exhausted.

I felt quite sophisticated as I paid the cab driver, knowing I still had a substantial sum of cash in my pocket. Fear took over as I approached the hotel entrance. How would I be allowed to register without papers from Russia. How could I go anywhere without a permit. How could I walk outside without the danger of a policeman asking for my papers. Worse, how could I register in the hotel without any forms of identity. I had a receipt for the trip to America. Nothing more.

My heart beat triple time as I approached the desk.

"I'd like a room."

The sleepy looking desk clerk eyed me for a moment, and, without a word, turned the register toward me.

I watched him covertly as I signed my name, ready to rush out of there if he reached for the nearby telephone. I had no idea of what I could do if I started running, but I had survived many battles in the past four years by reacting quickly,

"Five dollars a night," he said. "How long you expect to stay?"

"I'm not sure. At least a couple nights."

"Ten dollars," he said, giving me a room key.

This hurdle over, I decided to waste no time reporting to the police to avoid being grabbed on the street without "papers." Mine host directed me to a station only two blocks away.

A burly, ruddy faced desk sergeant greeted me. "What can I do for you, young man?"

"Uh, I just came here from Europe, and I would like to register."

"Register? What for?" His eyes narrowed slightly.

"For papers."

His eyelids widened to a look of disbelief. "Papers? What kind of papers?"

"Identity papers. Travel permits."

"You don't need special papers here."

"But what would I do if a policeman stops me on the street?"

"Nobody will stop you unless you break a law, or jaywalk or somethin'."

"But how would you find me if I did something like that?"

"Don't you worry about that. We would find you!"

Puzzled, I returned to the hotel and collapsed on my bed.

YOUR NAME IS FLECKER?

Seven hours later the telephone signal shocked me out of deep sleep. It was the desk clerk, informing me that someone awaited me in the lobby. Still half asleep, I had visions of being caught by the Gestapo, or the SS. Then reality returned, and I quickly dressed, wondering who could be waiting for me.

"It's crazy," I thought. "I don't know anybody in America."

In the lobby a man of about sixty-five beckoned to me. "Your name is Flecker?"

"Yes."

"What is your father's name?"

"Fawish," I said.

"And your grandfather's name?"

"Schmuel."

A big smile lit his face as he said, "I am Flecker, too! Call me Simon."

He told me he was born in Warsaw, where his father and my grandfather

were first cousins. He had come to the United States about forty years ago. He remembered that my grandmother had lived on Mila 18, and he knew of my family.

"But how did you know I was here?" I asked.

"The United Jewish Appeal issues daily lists of passengers arriving from Europe. I saw your name and came here to bring you to stay with my family."

We had been warned, in Germany, to be wary of fathers who wanted to marry off their daughters.

"Do you have children at home?" I asked, thinking to conceal my fear.

He laughed. "I do," he said. "But don't worry; my two daughters are married. I have two sons, also."

I learned later that day that they had recently lost a son and daughter-in-law.

We took a taxi to Newark, New Jersey, where the family was gathered to greet me. They were wonderful people, humorous and good-natured. The evening got off to a fun start when, sensing that one of the daughters was staring at the back of my head, I asked, "What are you looking for, the green horns?"

Thus began a night of gaiety with a fascinating family. Simon, my benefactor, insisted that I stay with them until I found work to support myself. In the two weeks I stayed there, his wife treated me as though her son, Willie, had come back to them. She would get up at four in the morning to make me a seven-course breakfast, often calling me "Willie."

I realized this situation was not good for her, and told her and Simon that I could leave now. I worked for their son in his produce business and could afford to be on my own. I rented a room in a house for five dollars a month.

I was grateful for my incredible good fortune in being found by family in the United States, and I was grateful for that family's hospitality and help. But after a few months of candling eggs, I decided it was time to increase my earning power. I approached Simon's son with a query about setting up a sales route.

"Tell you what," he said. "You'll need a car to get around. I'll loan you the money, and supply you with eggs and whatever else you want to sell. And you'll get special price."

The following Monday I got a driver's license and a car. We loaded the car with eggs and delicious sweet cream butter, and I began knocking on doors in the Polish and German sections of Newark. There was encouraging response to my offer of eggs straight from the farm and the best sweet butter available at prices lower than in the stores.

Quality, reasonable cost, and regular delivery produced a daily profit of thirty dollars or more. I would get up at five in the morning, load the car, and drive my route as soon as daylight scattered the night. I kept a list of each customer's

address and what was purchased. My net income ranged between $150 and $250 per week, a considerable sum in 1947.

Soon I was able to move from my rented bedroom to a five room apartment in Hillside. I became friendly with a group of Americans returned from service in the Pacific and Europe. They helped me adopt the American way of life, including how to host wild American parties.

I enrolled in school to learn better English. I bought a two-door red Chevrolet for the princely sum of $920; and I paid back the $141 I had borrowed in Berlin from the officer, who now was back home in New York.

Then I did a friend a favor which resulted in my finding a lifetime career and a lifelong interest. The friend, a photographer, wanted to open a studio but had no money. I advanced him funds for equipment and materiel with a handshake for a contract. My delivery route filled my days, and I had no thoughts of learning photography until two years later, when my partner found a brother from whom he had been separated by the Nazis. He had sought him since regaining his own freedom. Now he was going to Israel, where his brother lived, to rejoin what was left of his family.

I attempted to dissuade him, but his mind was made up.

"All right," I said. "This business is going too good just to give it up. How much do you want for your share? I'll hire somebody until I can jump in."

"Oh, no," he said. "The equipment is yours. You bought it. You financed the business It's all yours."

After he left, I decided to run the studio myself, though I knew nothing about photography. I made a deal with one of New Jersey's finest photographers to learn to use the camera and the darkroom. I still drove my route every day, returning home at five to make dinner, and then going to learn the basics of photography for a few hours each night. And I spent several hours a week doing electrical work for a contractor who bought eggs and butter from me.

Nineteen fifty was a successful year financially, but I embarked on a new venture that was a dismal failure eventually. I was introduced to a very pretty girl from France. We dated for three months, and I asked her to marry me.

Golda's mother implored me not to marry her daughter

"She's unstable," the mother said. "She has had serious emotional problems since she saw her father hanged by the Germans. We lived in the south of France, in a town where he was a respected physician. He joined the underground during the war, aiding partisans and allied soldiers trapped in German territory. Somebody reported him to the Gestapo, and he was arrested while operating on a downed pilot. He was hanged in the market place. We all had to watch."

My future wife was fourteen at the time, and she never recovered from the

shock of seeing her father swaying at the end of a rope. I felt that love and understanding could heal her, but it was never to be. I realized in short order that I had made a serious mistake, but I was determined to effect a rehabilitation for my wife.

By this time I had learned enough about photography to reopen the business. The demands of making a living in a new occupation took up most of my time, protecting me from the dilemma of my wife.

I served every photo need I could think of: baby portraits in the home, formal portraits in the studio, wedding photo coverage, commercial photography. The business increased rapidly, and I soon opened two more studios in New Jersey.

Most of my income was used to pay for psychiatric help for my wife, who still suffered from the shock of her father's death. She was a very unhappy person, constantly quarreling with her sisters and mother and me. A psychiatrist advised that a child might bring some contentment into her life. A beautiful daughter was born in 1955. Two years later we had another daughter to serve the same need.

The situation at home deteriorated. Neither psychiatric counseling nor the arrival of beautiful daughters two years apart were able to ease her depression. I buried myself in the business, which fortunately demanded more and more time. I opened studios in East Brunswick and in Staten Island, taking in a partner to help. The whole thing blew apart when I discovered my partner was stealing. I dissolved the partnership and opened my own studio in Staten Island.

The combination of an unhappy marriage and a consuming work schedule finally exacted a toll. One evening, I stayed to work in the darkroom, catching up on some print making. My employees could have handled it the next day, but I needed the discipline to shield me for a while from the tension of a sour marriage.

I could not walk away from the problem. I could not leave our two daughters under the influence of a mother unable to grow beyond the tragedy of her youth. There was no way out.

This dilemma was constantly on my mind. The long hours at work, the rigor of creative work were not enough to ease the ache. Until this night, when my body rebelled.

Heartburn was such a constant condition that I ignored the explosion of heat in my chest, far beyond normal discomfort.

"Damnit," I thought, "that's what I get for bolting food at that greasy diner."

The chest pain pulsed, stopping my breath at each peak.

"Wow, baby," I counseled. "Better sit down for a bit. Take an antacid. Relax

a little."

I lay down on a couch in my office. Neither antacid, milk, or relaxation had any effect.

I began talking out loud: "Sam, this is not good. Get yourself to the hospital."

The idea was good. The manner of execution, stupid! I drove myself. Though not a stranger to pain during the war years, I don't recall ever feeling such unrelenting torture as I fought to control the automobile. I remember a great feeling of achievement when I arrived at the hospital. That's all I remember about that night. I awoke next day in an intensive care ward, joined to electronic equipment which was helping to keep me alive. The weight of existence lightened for the next few days as I submitted to the will of nurses and doctors and medical equipment.

My doctor, a personal friend, didn't just prescribe treatment. He probed for causes of the attack. His concern as a doctor penetrated my reserve, and I described our bleak marriage of twenty-two years.

"Get out of it," he said. "Otherwise it'll end up killing you. This heart attack is a warning. The next one may be an ending."

A month after I was released from the hospital, I packed my clothes and left our home, assuring my wife that she and the girls, now sixteen and eighteen years old, would be supported to the end of my life.

The next step—divorce—was a bitter time. I gave our huge home to my wife and daughters, who blamed me and would have nothing to do with me. From the time I left our home until now, they never lacked for money to support a comfortable way of life.

I felt no need for luxurious trappings, which I could well afford. I moved into a room behind my studio and lived a monastic existence except for the people contacts which is a part of business. Otherwise, my social life was minimal.

One good friend, happily married, took exception to the way I now lived. His wife frequently invited me to dinner, and Ruben tried his best to get me back into the mainstream

Long before the divorce was concluded, he and Ruth constantly tried to find dates for me. One evening, as we had dinner together at a restaurant, Ruben exercised his will again with the following:

"Sam, we know a woman you really should meet. She's a divorcee, like you will soon be. She had a rotten mate, and finally got out of it, just like you're doing. She's intelligent, a bright conversationalist, and damned good looking. She'd be perfect for you. And, like you, she's not looking for a commitment. But I know she'd like to go out with a man like you."

"Ruben, thank you; but I just want to be left alone. I hurt too much that my children blame me for walking out—and I can't fault them. I hope you never have to experience this kind of a trauma. I need time to get through this. Maybe some day. But not yet."

Ruben and Ruth were unrelenting. They were fixed on this woman—and me.

"Listen to the kind of a person she is," they said. "Marilyn couldn't get a lawyer to handle her divorce. Her husband was a lawyer. Professional courtesy. She just wasn't comfortable with the hemming and hawing she ran into with attorneys reluctant to butt into the affairs of fellow attorneys. So she represented herself. She's very well organized. She got her divorce."

After a year of persuasion, I finally relented. I agreed to meet Marilyn.

CONTENTMENT RETURNS

"Next Tuesday," I said. "The weekend is booked solid with weddings and bar mitzvahs and parties to photograph, and I have to supervise several crews in several locations. Monday will be a twelve hour day of processing and printing. Tuesday I'll be able to rest a little during the day so that we can meet after supper and I won't fall asleep wherever we go."

I'll never forget that evening. We had agreed to meet in the lobby of a Holiday Inn between Long Island and Staten Island. "How will I recognize you," I asked.

"Well," she answered. "I won't be wearing a red rose."

"Okay," I said. "What kind of flower do you like that I won't wear in my lapel."

We exchanged descriptions, and I returned to work.

At seven o'clock Tuesday evening I walked into the lobby and picked her immediately out of the other persons present.

"Marilyn?"

"Yes," extending her hand to clasp mine for a tingling moment.

Displaying a scintillating flash of originality, I asked: "Did you have supper?"

In reply to her affirmative answer, I came up with another flash: Would you like some ice-cream?"

"That would be nice."

At a nearby ice-cream parlor, we started with small talk that let to a capsule exchange of personal histories. She had not had an easy life, I found out. Her main ambition in early life was to continue education through college, and her parents had agreed that she could do so. But there was no money when she

graduated high school. Her father had never been able to earn more than a bare living. They just weren't able to give her a college education.

Later, her marriage to a flamboyant lawyer proved a walk along the same path, but from a different direction. He was an expert at living beyond his means. He bought an imposing house, but could afford only enough furniture to make an impression. When they were out of an evening, he was a "Drinks for everybody!" kind of person. They travelled from debt to debt in a large, luxurious automobile.

We talked our way through time from those early days to the present.

In less than a couple of hours, we established a rapport that might normally have taken months.

I asked how her life was at this time.

"It's fine," she said, except for one thing. "I haven't been able to speak with my son since he went to live with his father. My two children and I are very close, and we lived together in a two-bedroom apartment. Joan and I each had a bedroom, and Doug slept on the living room couch. It wasn't very comfortable for him, but he endured it until one day a month or so ago.

"Look, Mom," he said. "Dad has that great big house, where I could have my own room and a comfortable bed. I'd like to move in with him, if it's okay with you. I could still spend a lot of time with you and Joan."

"He was right, of course. Only it hasn't worked out as we figured. "We haven't seen him at all, and every time I call to speak to him, his father answers the phone and hangs up."

"Would you like to speak to him now?"

"Are you a magician?"

"I try to be."

"It's sweet of you to offer," she said, giving me the phone number.

I sat at the public phone and dialed the number. The ex-husband answered.

"Mr._____?"

"Yessss," confirmed a questioning voice.

Mr._____,my name is O'Brien. I just heard a terrible thing, and it makes me very unhappy. You should allow your son to speak with his mother. Now, I'm connected (naming a couple of Mafia families). They wouldn't be happy about this, either."

"Who is this!" he exploded.

"I told you my name. You've forgotten it already? That makes me more unhappy. Now listen carefully. I'm offering you a choice: "a broken leg or a broken arm . Maybe even both!"

"Are you threatening me?" His voice quavered a bit.

"Oh no," I answered in silken tones. "I would never do that." I hung up and

returned to our table.

"Okay, Marilyn. Try calling your son now."

From that time, Marilyn had no more trouble reaching her son.

We left the ice-cream parlor when waiters began piling chairs on tables.

We drove to a scenic area and talked in the car until four in the morning.

The friendship developed to a time to discuss the future. I had previously explained that I would not make any commitments until I was finally divorced. She was understanding, but we both suffered. We broke up. And we suffered even more.

Eight months later, Ruben and Joan casually invited me to dinner. I had been immersed in work during those eight months, virtually abandoning social life. I was ready for a visit with good friends.

Marilyn was there when I arrived. I felt immense gratitude to our hosts. Seeing Marilyn, I realized how sorely I had missed her. It was a delightful evening, the first day of a new life for both of us. We saw each other frequently, and one day I proposed that we look for an apartment. We found one in Staten Island, where we lived together for two years until we were free.

Thus began the happiest nineteen years I had ever known. Now I had a home such as I had lost when I ran from the Nazi invaders a lifetime ago. Gradually my children had learned to accept me again. And Marilyn's two children had welcomed me from the start. Contentment returned.

Until Marilyn— beautiful, dynamic Marilyn; companion, co-worker, lover, wife—became ill. Seriously, we found out. Cancer, we found out. Advanced, we found out. My life eroded as we watched hers ebb. We both wore cheerful masks until the game reached its endpoint. We had help, but I allowed nobody but myself to lift her from the bed so she could lie on the living room couch. Or from the couch to the dining table, while she was still able to sit up and eat. Anything that didn't require the expertise of a practical nurse was automatically my responsibility. I treasured every opportunity to touch her, to hold her, to ease as much as I could of her distress.

Marilyn was taken on June 3, 1993. Her funeral was the only one of my immediate family I had ever attended. I have never found accurate knowledge of the deaths of my parents and siblings. Nor of their funerals, if ever there were any. I am profoundly grateful that I was able to observe a proper farewell for my friend wife, and that I can visit her grave.

Two years after Marilyn left, I was hospitalized for the most dangerous operation I had ever faced. Apparently the severe physical strain of helping her to move around during the later stages of her illness—literally carrying her from bedroom to living room when she felt well enough to move—affected the bullet still lodged in my spine. It downgraded from tolerably painful to unbearably so.

Diagnosis: if the slug were not removed. I would become a live vegetable or dead human. The odds of that happening even, with surgery, were 75% against success.

Luck was with me. That, combined with the skill and dexterity of two surgeons who painstakingly ousted the unwelcome resident from the nerve center.

I had no previous knowledge of the exact procedure, nor did the chief surgeon ever describe it to me afterwards. His answer to my queries: "The bullet is out. That's what's important."

I had to satisfy my curiosity, even if I wrote the scenario myself. This is what I surmised.

Totally anesthetized, I was propped upright on a special gurney which had a cutout at the body area, allowing the surgeons to work in concert, one pushing the bullet from an incision at the navel area, the other pulling the missile from an incision in my lower back.

They had to work slowly, v-e-r-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y. The bullet, I assume, was encased in scar tissue accumulated over the years to protect the main nerve channels from contamination by the lead.

This casing had to be painstakingly cut from its hold on nerves and cartilage and bone, then, with intense care, moved out along an unwavering path. A slightest deviation from the prescribed passage could have been disastrous. The surgeons worked nine and a half hours to move the bullet less than an inch into safety, and then to omit it entirely from the body.

Proof that they succeeded? It's five years since the operation. I'm writing this with a steady hand. I enjoy dancing. I'm able to help neighbors with tasks that require more physical effort than is usually available to a person of my age. I have my memories. What more can one ask for?